JIM *the* CONQUEROR

PETER B. KYNE

STRATFORD HOLLOW LIBRARY,
NO.

STRATFORD HOLLOW LIBRARY
NO.

STRATFORD HOLLOW LIBRARY
NO.

JIM THE CONQUEROR

JIM the CONQUEROR

BY

PETER B. KYNE

AUTHOR OF
THE VALLEY OF THE GIANTS,
THE ENCHANTED HILL,
TIDE OF EMPIRE, ETC.

GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT, 1927, 1929, BY
PETER B. KYNE

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED, INCLUDING THAT OF TRANSLATION INTO FOREIGN LANGUAGES, INCLUDING THE SCANDINAVIAN.

Printed in the United States of America

TO

KATHARINE H. JOHNSON

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED

IN AFFECTION

JIM THE CONQUEROR

JIM THE CONQUEROR

CHAPTER I

OLD William B. Latham lay on a wicker chaise longue in the veranda of his country house, Hillcrest, and pretended to be asleep—a subterfuge quite in keeping with a certain salient characteristic of his which, quite early in his career, had earned for him the not inappropriate sobriquet of "Crooked Bill." Not that the old rascal was crooked in the commonly accepted sense of that term as employed in the quaint patois of our times (indeed he was a most honorable man), but because he was possessed of an uncommon degree of craft, of audacious and generally amusing slyness, in business and out of it—a sort of super-prudence born of uncanny innate ability to read human nature.

Such men are rarely deficient in a sense of humor, and Crooked Bill had found life more abundantly provocative of laughter than of sighs. His friends, who were legion, always remarked when the subject of his happy existence was broached that there was not a reason on earth why it shouldn't be happy. He was popularly believed to have more money than some folks

have hay; he had no wife to bother his life and he paddled his own canoe; he enjoyed excellent health; in fact he had spent but two dollars and fifty cents on his physical up-keep in the last half-century, and this outlay constituted the one regret of his placid existence. In an absent-minded moment he had once swallowed two tablets of bichloride of mercury in mistake for aspirin. Having discovered his error almost instantly he had dashed to a doctor's office a block distant and been treated to an emetic of mustard and water. Since both these simple ingredients were to have been found in his own house, he had never ceased to regret the ignorance which had cost him that doctor's office fee. Every night before retiring he drank a glass of old port and ate half a dozen walnuts, which he cracked with his own teeth.

It pleased William B. Latham this late afternoon to pretend to be asleep in order that he might, from under the drawn-down rim of his hat, watch his late wife's niece engaged in a pastime peculiarly dear to that most attractive young woman, to wit, snaring and breaking the heart of a youth whose manifest decencies appeared, to Crooked Bill, sufficient justification for receiving from the young lady in question what her uncle and guardian described as "a whole lot of letting alone."

Although attached to this Circe by the bonds of an affection somewhat more than avuncular and somewhat less than paternal, Crooked Bill was, nevertheless, entirely out of sympathy with her method of extracting

from life a degree of interest and amusement necessary to making it worth the living; albeit her coquetry, so obvious to the old worldling but so thoroughly unsuspected by her victims, never failed to titillate his sense of the ridiculous. Safely hidden behind a screen of passion vines, through an aperture in which he could see the young people without being seen (his pretense of sleep being merely an additional precaution and quite in keeping with his motto of "safety first"), Crooked Bill estimated the situation and found it not to his liking.

With the ordinary run of young gentlemen who laid their vealy hearts at the feet of Miss Roberta Antrim, Crooked Bill had little sympathy and less patience. He was of the opinion that the receipt of their passports from Roberta was not a tragedy that weighed very heavily on them very long. The majority of them were he-flirts, amusing themselves with Roberta as outrageously as she amused herself with them, or else frankly attracted to her as a moth is attracted to a candle flame. And, of course, when the candle is extinguished the moth flies away, unless, indeed, he has already foolishly immolated himself. Up to the present none of Roberta's rejects had committed suicide, although not less than four had vowed so to do. Crooked Bill had more than a suspicion, too, that, in addition to Roberta's undoubted charms, the fact that she was his heir was not a negligible attraction to her continuous and shifting entourage.

In the case of the young gentleman who sat with Roberta on the stone bench under the elm at the end of the garden in the soft summer twilight, Crooked Bill could find no extenuating circumstances to adduce as to why Roberta should not be convicted of inflicting cruel and unusual punishment. Glenn Hackett, to begin with, was of good family where brains and money, in evidence for three generations, had always been used wisely. He was not the collar-advertisement type of man; on the contrary he was rather tall, loose-jointed and angular, with a plain honest face like a kind horse. He was apt to be regarded as downright homely until he smiled, when one forgot his plainness of feature, for that smile invested him with a singular manly charm. One trusted him instinctively; his quiet, dry Yankee wit, never disclosed on brief acquaintance, always made one desirous of meeting him again. He was thirty years old, a lawyer and a good one, which is to say that Crooked Bill gladly paid him a large annual retainer. The old man's highest compliment for Glenn Hackett was that he had horse sense, and was the only man he knew who appeared to be as common and comfortable as an old shoe and yet wasn't.

Crooked Bill wished he might have been privileged to hear what Glenn Hackett and Roberta were saying. However, he was a fairly accurate reader of gesture, facial expression and nods, so he was assured that Hackett was proposing marriage to his niece.

"It'll be like her to refuse him," he decided, "and him

the only real man I've ever seen on the premises. Shy on small talk and society chatter, but a good listener and a speaker of words worth while when he has something to say. And for once in his life he's doing all the talking while Roberta does the listening. I know that meek, sad resigned bend of her head while she tugs at her handkerchief and tries to appear surprised. She must have admiration from men or life is a delusion and a snare! And now she's picked on a victim that's bound to back-fire on her, or I'm no judge of men. Hello, he's talking too much! He's getting oppressive. She's finding the going not to her liking—ah, I thought so!"

Crooked Bill drew his hat brim down over his nose; then he rolled his head to one side, opened his mouth a little and commenced to breathe in long even respirations. He heard the rapid patter of Roberta's little feet coming up the flagged walk, almost felt the swish of her as she passed him and entered the house. In about five minutes he heard the firm, leisurely tread of Glenn Hackett following, and was aware, presently, that the young man had sat down in a chair beside him. So he pretended to sleep on for five minutes, then he stirred uneasily, gritted his teeth, sighed, opened his eyes, looked straight ahead of him at the passion vine and yawned pleasurably.

"Well, now that you haven't had your forty winks," Hackett observed quietly, "what's your opinion as to what my next move should be?"

"I never cared for riddles," Crooked Bill protested virtuously.

"I've just jilted Roberta!"

Crooked Bill sat up with the abruptness of a Jack-in-the-box, which, in all fairness, he resembled not a little. "Shoot me for a horse-thief!" he ejaculated, with that expression conveying to Hackett, had that young man not been already aware of the former's antecedents, the information that old William B.'s voting precinct had not always been Dobbs Ferry, Westchester County, New York. It aided and abetted the charge made by his hat that once upon a time Crooked Bill had been a son of vast horizons. Even to the unobservant few who, in these days of motion pictures, might fail to have been impressed by that hat, Crooked Bill's soft, pliable leather boots with his trouser legs drawn over them, spoke eloquently of a land far beyond the Palisades on the Jersey shore. "Played fast and loose with you, eh, boy?"

"No. Just tried to."

"So you threw the dally over your pommel and gave her the bust, eh? Three cheers for our side."

"Cheer to your heart's content. This poor devil isn't dying," Glenn Hackett retorted savagely.

Crooked Bill looked cautiously around to make certain the door from the veranda to the living-room was closed, for it was instinct with him never to make a move until all the conditions were propitious. "I hadn't any idea you two were engaged, son."

"We weren't, although I think we could have been if I had been fool enough to insist. Bobby likes me tremendously. I'm sure of that."

"Like is right. I doubt if she'll ever love anybody, but if she should I'm certain he'll be a married man with a large family and unavailable from every point of view. You interested her, son, far more than any of your predecessors, and I've seen them all come and go. I reckon that's because you were a mite harder to land than the others. You gave her a run. However, I sort o' reckoned that'd be the way when you first druv up," he added comically.

"She's been expecting me to propose for a month, and just a little while ago I was fool enough to do it. She looked so infernally proposable today! And while I was doing it I looked at her steadily and noted the triumphant glint in her eyes, and a little self-satisfied smile on her lovely lips. Something told me she was preparing the skids for me—"

"She was, undoubtedly. I watched the entire performance from here. I know the signs, Hackett."

"So, no sooner had I popped the question and no sooner had she commenced to assure me that she hadn't remotely suspected this attachment, than I interrupted her and withdrew my proposition. I begged her not to think any more about it."

"Hell's fire!" Crooked Bill was steeped in reverential awe.

"That got her blazing mad," Hackett continued.

"It would anger a sheep," Crooked Bill agreed. "Roberta's mighty high and handsome in her ideas."

"I told her it had suddenly occurred to me that she could never possibly consider marrying a lawyer who grubbed for a living in the heart of New York's financial quarter. I told her I was quite certain that what she was seeking was a knight-errant and I wasn't it. I told her I'd be the last man in the world to skewer himself on a spear, like kidneys *en brochette,* for the sake of a lady's smile. I told her I had suddenly made up my mind that it was all a hideous mistake and—But that's as far as I got."

"She up and left you then, son? She was crying as she passed me. I didn't see her, but my hearing's right good for my years. Boy, you're a gift from God! Continue to play your cards like that and she's yours without a flicker. That girl requires a whole lot o' lickin', but she's only got to be licked once!"

"I'm wondering if I overplayed my hand?"

"What if you did? She didn't have even a dirty little deuce to trump your ace, did she?"

"I suppose I startled her."

"You jarred her conceit, that's what you did. The dearest of women have a lot o' that commodity, son, only they call it womanly pride. However, they'll all humiliate themselves to win the right man. You just keep on rollin' your hoop the way you've started and you'll win in a walk."

"I'm a little bit afraid to carry on, Mr. Latham.

She plays fast and loose with a man. Doesn't appear to have a very well-formulated idea that a man is anything except an object of amusement—and I'm no jester to a queen. She's a confirmed flirt."

"They make awful good wives once you halter-break 'em," Crooked Bill suggested.

"How do you know?"

"I married one—and she was that girl's aunt. Roberta comes by her misfortune honestly. All the Barrows women were romantic. In fact Roberta's mother ran away with an end man in a minstrel show. She adored the jokes that boy used to crack until he cracked one on her by marrying her. She didn't get back at him for two years, but when she did the laugh was on him. She bore him Roberta and from that day until he died Roberta ran him ragged and made the poor devil like it. He was a good end man but a poor judge of investments, and when he and his wife were killed in a train wreck, my wife and I fell heir to Roberta. She was eleven then. My wife died ten years ago and I've been riding herd on Roberta ever since."

"I fear you've made a bad job of it, Mr. Latham."

"Well, you can't bar me for tryin'," Crooked Bill responded calmly. "The girl's sound at heart, but cursed with a face and figure that'd make Helen of Troy look like a Navajo squaw in comparison. She has brains, she has poise—"

"Not any more," Glenn Hackett interrupted gloomily. "I've just upset her poise!"

Crooked Bill indulged himself in a very mirthful little chuckle. "Well, at any rate, she's a very good dear sweet girl," he defended finally.

"She can't coquet with me. She wants to be pursued. I'm a busy man and I've pursued her for a year, and you know, Mr. Latham, as well as I do, that whenever she has another swain on hand she always devotes herself to him and ignores me."

"Wants to see if you'll get jealous. You'd ought to have done that much for her and it would have tickled her most to death to think she had the power to hurt you, and she'd have been so grateful to you for obligin' her, most likely she'd have treated you human for a month thereafter. But you made the mistake of resistin' her, son. No woman dodges any sort of contest and I never knew one that didn't dig into a fight with a winning sperrit. Trouble is, you don't know any other way of fightin' except to go in to win with any weapon handy. A feller in love with Roberta had ought to take a leaf out of the lifetime experience of a coyote with foxhounds. Señor Coyote, meeting up with a little lone foxhound he maybe can lick without extendin' himself, never fusses his fur in a precipitate engagement. He just lopes away and not too fast, either; he lures the hound off into the desert where he knows some of his friends will be nosing around, and then they gang-jump that pup and destroy him with ease. When you jilted Roberta a little while ago, was that just your strategy or your temper?"

"My temper, I think. I know I lost it completely and yielded to a sudden mad impulse to give her a dose of her own medicine."

Crooked Bill stroked his chin and spat a thin amber stream over the veranda railing. "Tell you what you do, son," he announced presently, and Glenn Hackett leaned forward to listen to the words of wisdom from the oracle. "You stay to dinner just as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. Roberta'll dine in her room, if she has any appetite at all, which I doubt, because the maid'll tell her you're still here and she'll think that's indecent of you. Let her think it. Continue to come out uninvited and unexpected whenever the notion grips you, and when she gives you the dead face you grin at her like a Chinese idol and tell her how winsome she looks in that new dress. As the poet says:

> The constant drip of water,
> Wears away the hardest stone.
> The constant gnaw of Towser,
> Masticates the toughest bone.
> The constant wooing lover
> Carries off the blushing maid,
> And the constant advertiser
> Is the one that gets the trade.

Continue to advertise yourself, son. . . . How about an old-fashioned Bourbon-whisky cocktail?"

Hackett, remembering his host had had his liquor for a decade, nodded gloomy assent, and Crooked Bill

went inside to mix the drinks himself, for there were certain duties which his early training indicated should never be entrusted to a butler!

Pausing not an instant in her precipitate flight from the most amazing and impossible male biped she had ever encountered, Roberta Antrim fled to her room, locked the door, lay down on her bed and indulged herself for ten minutes in that delight of her sex customarily known as a good cry.

"The wretch!" she soliloquized. "The odious boor! He had the effrontery to talk to me exactly as if I were a refractory client instead of the girl he had but a moment before assured he loved to distraction. Oh, dear, what humiliation! I hate him, I hate him, I hate him. I'll never speak to him again as long as I live."

When a woman has come to that conclusion, quite usually she finds it time to cease vain repining and weeping, lave her inflamed eyes with some soothing lotion and powder her nose. So presently Roberta did all of these things and while doing them appraised herself very critically in her mirror. At bottom she was much too wholesome to entertain a cheap vanity, so she did not waste time in an extended inventory. She knew she had a medium-sized, well-shaped head covered with the sort of golden-tinted auburn hair which so many women attempt, but which few achieve. Catty girls often said of Roberta's hair that a chemical analysis would develop a trace of henna in it, but this was

not true and even her detractors knew it. She had the sort of rich creamy skin that goes with such hair; her eyebrows and eyelashes were darker than her hair, their luxuriance conveying a hint of Celtic blood.

Her eyes, large, brown and a trifle sleepy, owing to her acquired trick of gazing up at men from under the lids, were ideal for setting the reason of an impressionable male tottering on its throne. Her nose had just escaped being snubby and was tilted at so gentle an angle as to confer upon her a faintly haughty expression when her face was in repose. She had a short, beautifully curved upper lip—which adorable malformation permitted much too easy a display of even, hard white teeth. Her lower lip was full, tender and just a shade wilful. Roberta's was no sad, gentle, resigned, wise Mona Lisa smile; it reminded one of the flash of a heliograph. Her chin was full and aggressive, her body beautifully formed, lithe as a cat's and suggestive of abounding health and much outdoor exercise.

Despite her almost startling beauty one realized instinctively that Roberta was not (sentimentally speaking) a clinging vine. One felt, too, that she had a healthy temper, despite her perennial good nature and her tolerance for her own sex. As a matter of fact Roberta did possess a temper readily aroused, but she had the saving grace of refusing to admit it except under extraordinary circumstances. A certain coolness, a quiet flash of the brown eyes, a more meticulous graciousness, an infinitesimal lift of the firm chin were the

signs Crooked Bill had learned to associate with squalls from that quarter, and for her repression he loved her dearly. He, knowing the blood that was in her, was the only human being who knew also how difficult it was for Roberta, under stress, to refrain from hurling books and traveling clocks! Also, because he had access to these private founts of information and understanding, the old rascal knew how short-lived exasperation was in that jaunty, saucy, lovable soul.

Appraising herself in her mirror now, Roberta twisted her lovely head and cocked it at various angles. No, decidedly her neck was not scrawny, nor was her skin pallid or dull. She was looking and feeling her best, mentally and physically, and she knew that the light green romaine crêpe dress, the "nude" stockings and green suède pumps with the plain cut-steel buckles set her off to additional advantage. In the stilted language of the American fashion writer, they constituted the *dernier cri* of perfect taste, for Roberta was one of those women to whom a clash of colors was impossible. She reflected with a sort of sweet bitterness that she had dressed that afternoon with an eye single to impinging herself upon the cool, quietly impersonal glance of Glenn Hackett. "If I were a girl who wore diamonds to the breakfast table," she told her reflection, "there might have been some excuse for his gauche conduct. One moment he had proposed and the next he was withdrawing the proposal. I wouldn't have accepted him on a bet, nice as he is and comfortable as

he is to have around, but he might have given me an opportunity to say so! He was terrible! He gave me the impression that, in one revealing moment, he had seen something in me that revolted him—and I'm not revolting, I'm not, I'm not—"

Once more she gave way to tears, but not for long. With Roberta tears were a sign of weakness, the weapons of the tyrannous, the first refuge of an ungallant and unsportsmanlike woman, although when her emotions were deeply stirred, as by grief or pity, she enjoyed weeping. She patronized human-interest or heart-throb plays and avoided profound books written with an obviously greater concern for style than substance. Instinctively she wanted to get her teeth into life; at least that is how Crooked Bill expressed it, and he had a peculiar gift for apt and illuminating expression.

She dried her tears and applied the powder rag again. And then the real reason for her charm—the reason men adored her and made love to her—presented itself. Roberta was a good sport—none better, and hated a quitter with all the strength of her vital, intelligent soul. She made a little grimace at herself.

"Well, Bobby Antrim, you took a man's-size beating, didn't you? You're of a piece with the fellow who went hunting, promising to bring a bear back into camp. And he did—with the bear just six feet behind him! Oi-yoi! Oi-yoi! Well, that Hackett imbecile isn't dull, at any rate. And I did start to say something

banal—all about never having suspected his attachment! I see it all very clearly now. Right there little Bobby went blah! Yes, that was a sour note—and he has an ear for music. That man-animal has some pride—and I had thought they all had ego!"

She sat down in a low rocker to think it over very carefully. As usual, her resentment and rage were disappearing at the double; she was only sensible now of a feeling of humiliation, not so much because of what Glenn Hackett had said and done as because she had failed so miserably in feminine adroitness to meet an extraordinary situation. In a way of speaking he had demolished her. Paralyzed her powers of initiative and inventiveness and left her helpless to defend herself; ground her to a pulp!

The only thing he had been decent enough to refrain from doing was laugh at her, but of course he had been much too angry to do that. He had contented himself with glaring at her in a most unloverlike manner, which demonstrated all too conclusively that his protestations of love, made a minute before, had been unpremeditated, unsound, insecure, and wholly inconsequential. She was glad now that she had found him out, because for a month she had been asking herself if it could be possible that she was becoming seriously interested in the man.

She decided now that his unusualness, as compared with the average run of men, was what had challenged her interest and attention, for of course she could never

afford to admit, even to herself, that he had aroused every drop of sporting blood in her sporty little body. The fact that he had been indifferent, sentimentally lethargic—a bit dull, in fact—had constituted a challenge to her; and she had resolved to demonstrate to him that he was not, nor by any possibility ever could be, where she was concerned, the captain of his soul, the master of his fate!

And he had proved to her what a monumental failure she had turned out to be in an art where, to quote Crooked Bill again, she was supposed to be one hundred and fifty per cent perfect!

Suddenly Roberta began to laugh. Such a hearty, merry, mellow little laugh it was. "Thinks he's won a great victory," she decided. "Well, like John Paul Jones, I have not yet begun to fight. I'll bring that unusual man to his knees and when I have him there I'll—well, I'll not do anything so unladylike as to put my foot in his face, but I'll laugh at him! I swear I will. I'll laugh out loud!"

There is always a feeling of comfort when one has come to a decision after wrestling with a knotty problem. Roberta had her poise back again; she felt again that she was ready to conquer new worlds and make them like it. So she went into her sitting-room and opened the door leading into the hall and the window that overlooked the veranda. Then she sat down at her little boudoir grand piano and played loudly "I Don't Care If You Never Come Back." When she had fin-

ished that and was trying to think up another musical insult, somebody commenced whistling "In the Gloaming" from the veranda. The loathsome words of the first verse ran through Roberta's brain:

In the gloaming, oh, my darling,
Think not bitterly of me,
Though I passed away in silence,
Left you lonely, set you free.

"He's a bit of a dog," thought Roberta tranquilly. Then she remembered the city of his birth, which he had long since left, so she banged out furiously: "Back, Back, Back to Baltimore!" Whereupon Mr. Hackett went back, but not to Baltimore. He went back to the days of sickly sentimental ballads, and Roberta heard him sing—or rather chant, for the man was tone-deaf—

"She was happy till she met you,
And the fault is all your own,
If she wishes to forget you,
You will please leave her alone."

Roberta stuck her red head out of the window. "Hey! Hey!" she called. "We're silly."

"Your apology is accepted," Glenn Hackett called up to her, without showing himself.

"It's a terrible thing to have to hate a human being so," Roberta decided, and closed the window. Then she went downstairs and found Glenn Hackett and Crooked

Bill in the library enjoying old-fashioned Bourbon whisky cocktails.

"Have one, honey?" her guardian asked coaxingly. "A tiny one?"

"No, thank you, Uncle Bill. Give my share to Mr. Hackett. He's going to need it to give him courage to face the future."

"Bah!" Mr. Hackett replied rudely. He caught a wildly approving wink from Crooked Bill and decided to leap in over his head. "Sour grapes," he added—a bit viperishly, Roberta thought.

Roberta smiled with exceeding politeness, but there was coolness in the smile. Crooked Bill noticed her chin had gone up about a quarter of an inch. "You remind me, Glenn, of the soldiers who volunteered in the late war," she retorted.

"How come?" Crooked Bill queried innocently. He was a very mischievous and malevolent old man and knew from experience that Glenn Hackett was about to walk into one, as the saying is. Hence, he thought he owed himself the enjoyment of watching it land, notwithstanding the fact that his sympathies were all with Hackett.

"Naturally I would, Bobby. I volunteered. I saw my duty and did it nobly."

"You're a pig," Roberta charged sweetly, "and that isn't the answer."

"Well, then, you tell one," Crooked Bill urged.

"What's the use? Mr. Hackett isn't interested."

"Of course he is. Aren't you, Hackett?"

"Oh, mildly. Let it fly, Bobby."

"Because you lacked the courage to wait for the draft."

He was nonplused, and no man can be nonplused and not show it. Roberta's silvery laugh rang through the house. "Let's be good friends, Glenn," she said in her most ingratiating and fascinating manner. "You are so intelligent one can't help being attracted to you, and usually you're very nice. Really, if your bank account should ever be brought to the sear and yellow leaf you should set up as a fortune-teller and mind-reader."

"I thought I had read yours correctly. I see now I did not."

"Indeed, you did. You're marvelous."

"You'll marry me when I get ready to marry you," he charged amiably.

"Why, you tell jokes, don't you?"

"Time!" Crooked Bill saw that the issue was far from clarifying. "No more of these lovers' quarrels, Roberta. Glenn is staying for dinner. You'll join us, of course, honey?"

"Why, certainly, Uncle Bill. How delightful, Glenn!"

Any man who thinks he can outfence a woman is a fool, and suddenly Glenn Hackett realized he was all of that. Such realizations always disturb a manly man. "If I remain for dinner, Mr. Latham, I fear I'll not

be able to do justice to your excellent cuisine. Therefore, with your permission, Bobby, and yours, sir, I'd like to motor back to town."

Crooked Bill was upset. "Hell's fire!" he exclaimed, using his most formidable oath. He had placed his money, so to speak, on young Hackett and now the ingrate was running out on him, to employ a colloquialism. He was prepared to enter a vigorous protest, but the maid, entering with a telegram, rendered that impossible.

"A telegram for you, Miss Roberta!"

"Thanks, Minna. May I?" With uplifted brows to her uncle and his guest, she commenced to tear the envelop.

"She's very polite, no matter what her other faults may be," Hackett remarked to Crooked Bill. Roberta ignored him and read aloud:

LOS ALGODONES, TEXAS,
JUNE 21, 1925.

MISS ROBERTA ANTRIM, HILLCREST, DOBBS FERRY, N. Y.

YOUR UNCLE TOM HAD AN ARGUMENT WITH A COWMAN YESTERDAY STOP THERE WILL BE A FUNERAL TOMORROW STOP I GOT YOUR ADDRESS BY FRISKING UNCLE TOM ON WHOSE PERSON I FOUND YOUR LETTER TO HIM OF THE SECOND INSTANT STOP IF YOU INSIST I WILL SEND HIM TO YOU CHARGES PREPAID STOP HOWEVER IF YOU WILL TAKE THE ADVICE OF A WELL-INTENTIONED STRANGER YOU WILL PERMIT HIM TO AWAIT THE

TRUMP OF RESURRECTION IN THE LAND HIS SHEEP MADE FALLOW STOP IF YOU HAVE ANY INTEREST IN HIS ESTATE I SUGGEST YOU TAKE STEPS TO PROTECT IT STOP IF UNABLE TO DO THIS IMMEDIATELY WIRE ME AUTHORITY AND I WILL TAKE CHARGE OF IT STOP MOST USUALLY I AM HONEST STOP REFERENCE FEDERAL TRUST COMPANY EL PASO.

JAIME MIGUEL HIGUENES

"Hell's fire!" Crooked Bill's voice was the first to break the silence when Roberta had finished reading this remarkable communication. "It's true. There is a God that marks the sparrow's fall—and your Uncle Tom was a bird!"

"Well, now that he's dead, Uncle Bill, you might be charitable and speak kindly of him. At least he was my last of kin," Roberta chid the old man.

"All right, honey, I'll not say another word."

Glenn Hackett thought the situation, while a bit clouded, deserved the customary consideration. "I'm very sorry, Bobby," he said.

"That's kind of you, Glenn. Unfortunately I never knew Uncle Tom—had never seen him, that is, I never had opportunity to develop an affection for him, so really the news of his death comes to me with something of the same interest with which one learns that the Ameer of Afghanistan has been assassinated—again! It's too bad, of course, but really poor Uncle Tom wasn't a very lovable character, I'm afraid."

"He was a turkey buzzard," Crooked Bill declared with finality. "Roberta's paternal uncle," he went on to explain for the benefit of Hackett. "There was something unstable about the whole Antrim tribe. Roberta's father went in for the nigger minstrels and Tom took to associating with sheep. I reckon the old bandit must have been worth considerable, and so far as I know, Roberta, you're his next of kin. So it looks as if you're in the sheep business in Texas."

Roberta read the letter again. "Judging by the name of the sender of this telegram, Jaime Miguel Higuenes, it would appear that Texas boasts at least one very intelligent, very thoughtful, very frank and very humorous Mexican. He expresses himself like an educated American. Uncle Bill, you spent a great many years down there. Do you happen to know the Higuenes family?"

Crooked Bill's face had worn his most crafty smile while Roberta was speaking, but now it was blank and expressionless. "It's been twenty-five years since I operated in Texas, Roberta. Higuenes! Higuenes! I can't seem to remember anybody by that name."

"It would appear," Roberta decided presently, "that I have need to engage a lawyer to investigate Uncle Tom's estate." She glanced with frank interest and approval at Hackett.

"Certainly. Of course," Crooked Bill agreed, and thought more kindly of Uncle Tom for having provided an opportunity for these two to forget their re-

cent differences and be friendly again in the name of business. "Hackett is the very man."

"Hackett isn't," that harassed person declared with finality. "Jaime Miguel Higuenes is. That man is honest and fearless. I can tell that much from his telegram. Also he gives bank references. If you desire, Mr. Latham, I shall telegraph the bank he mentions." He made Roberta a slight, deprecatory bow. "I am venturing to presume that you are going to entrust your Uncle Bill with the details of this case. It would be confusing and annoying to you to have to attend to it personally."

"Certainly, Glenn. Uncle Bill is the natural and inevitable bearer of all my burdens."

"If the bank's reply would seem to indicate the advisability of requesting Higuenes to take charge of your Uncle Tom's estate for the present, may I send him a telegram, signing your name, and requesting him to do so, Roberta?"

Roberta was rereading the telegram. "I think," she declared, "that Jaime Miguel Higuenes must be a perfectly fascinating person. In twenty-three words he gives one the whole dramatic story of a bloody shooting scrape out on the range and gives one the impression—in fact, the conviction—that the result was no surprise to him and that he is not sorry the tragedy occurred! He is resourceful, not squeamish and has initiative, because in the pursuit of information he dared to pick a dead man's pocket. He is kind and friendly and thoughtful and wants to help a person he has never

seen, and he is a man of substance and takes a justifiable pride in his personal and financial standing."

"Oh, those Spanish dons are as proud as Lucifer," Crooked Bill assured her.

"He is also good-natured and easy-going, otherwise he would not bother himself with the probably thankless task of protecting the interests of a stranger—and an American at that. Probably he acted thus because I am a woman, which proves he is gallant and chivalrous."

"A sort of knight-errant," Crooked Bill murmured maliciously, and Hackett shot him a look of displeasure. "Well, Mexicans, of whatever class, are very polite to a lady. They always make a great to-do about women. The chances are this Higuenes is an educated half-breed Aztec Indian."

"I don't believe it," Roberta declared with conviction. "I'm sure he's pure Castilian and most delightful."

"Probably older than Cortez," Crooked Bill hazarded.

"Nonsense, Uncle Bill. He's young. Of course he is. There's a note of careless youth in this telegram, and I'm surprised that you have overlooked it. He is very handsome, with raven-black hair and white teeth; he is about six feet tall, has small hands and feet, and sings and plays the guitar under ladies' windows. When he greets a lady he bows over her hand and kisses it, oh, so lightly and respectfully! I adore men like that."

Glenn Hackett fidgeted uncomfortably. He knew he was under fire, but from ambush. However, he decided to try a chance shot. "If he should ever meet you, Bobby, he would undoubtedly fall in love with you. And of course you'd tease him on, for the mere joy of the conquest, and when he awakened to the true state of affairs his love would turn to hatred and he'd tuck you away in the local cemetery with your late Uncle Tom."

"That's right, Hackett. A girl can't play fast and loose with her Mexican sweetheart. They have their women trained down there and lead them in the way they should go. I wish Higuenes had informed us who killed Cock Robin. He merely says it was a cowman."

"I wonder if he got hurt?" Roberta murmured.

"Does it matter particularly?" For a reason he had not even tried to analyze, but which had been born of a subconscious resentment of the man who had made it possible to interject Jaime Miguel Higuenes into Roberta Antrim's thoughts, Glenn Hackett spoke.

Ten thousand cunning imps peeped for an instant from Crooked Bill's old eyes. "No, he didn't get hurt—at least, not very badly."

"How do you know?" Hackett demanded, and Roberta looked at her uncle inquiringly.

"I don't know. I just feel it, bud. Did I ever tell you that I am the seventh son of a seventh son and that I was born with a veil?"

"No, you did not, and this is the first I have heard

of it." Roberta challenged. "I believe you know Jaime Miguel Higuenes."

"I couldn't make an affidavit to that, Roberta. I cannot recall having met him or even heard of him, so help me!"

"You're somewhat mysterious."

"That's why he's called Crooked Bill," Hackett informed her.

"I'm not at all mysterious," the old rascal protested.

"I know you're not, Uncle Bill. You're perfectly obvious, but you adore appearing mysterious."

And just then the butler entered to announce dinner. "Better reconsider your decision and break bread with us," Crooked Bill urged their guest.

"Yes, do," Roberta pleaded.

"Thank you, I think I shall not." Then to the butler. "Harms, will you be good enough to get my hat and coat and telephone the garage for my car?"

When Glenn Hackett's car had rolled away down the driveway, Crooked Bill turned to his ward. "Round two for little Bright-eyes. I'm placing my money on the red."

"Who," the girl demanded firmly, "is Jaime Miguel Higuenes?"

"I don't know, honey. I can only suspect, and some day I'll verify my suspicions and tell you."

"Please tell me your suspicions now, there's a dear," and Roberta smiled her most coaxing smile and put her arms around Crooked Bill's neck.

"Ah," he murmured, "a man can struggle along under a mystery but it drives a woman crazy. A moment ago you stated I adore being mysterious. Honey, I'm an old man with only you and my love of appearing mysterious making life worth the living, so I'll not tell you what I suspect and you are perfectly powerless to drag it out of me. Moreover, you've treated that boy scandalously, because he's much too fine a young fellow to be accorded the same treatment the sprays of sweet clover you've been accustomed to, have received at your hands."

"Don't scold," Roberta pleaded.

"Then don't try to pry out of me things I cannot tell you."

"For two cents," Roberta threatened, "I'd go down to Los Algodones and investigate Jaime Miguel Higuenes personally."

"If you do you'll get the surprise of your sweet young life, my dear."

Roberta's brown eyes danced. Nobody knew better than Crooked Bill how she cherished surprises. Figuratively speaking she would swim a muddy river if a surprise awaited her on the opposite shore.

"I think I should go down to Uncle Tom's funeral," she suggested. "I'm the last of the Antrims and it would be rather indecent of me to permit strangers—and not very sympathetic strangers, I fear—to bury him."

Crooked Bill was always practical, even if mysteri-

ous. "I wouldn't do that, honey. I'm afraid Uncle Tom won't keep until you get there. I have never heard of ice or undertakers in Los Algodones, and as for hermetically sealed caskets, there just aren't any. I have a friend down there, however, and I'll wire him to attend the obsequies and send flowers for you and a wreath of cactus for me."

"Why have you always disliked Uncle Tom so?"

"Because you're his niece, not mine, and he's never showed the slightest interest in you, except to send you five dollars at Christmas and on your birthdays; because I staked the unholy wretch in the cow business and he sold out the cows, refused to pay the loan, went to Mexico where I couldn't collect and set up in the sheep business; because he was ornery from birth and looked it; because, from the day I married your aunt until the day of her death Uncle Tom grafted off me on the strength of the fact that I was a relative-in-law; because it was his nature to approach every proposition in life from the side or the rear, never from the front. Your father was not what I would call a mental giant, Roberta, but he was kind and amusing and on the square, whereas your Uncle Tom was a throwback, a black sheep."

"Every family has them," the girl defended.

"Well, honey, you haven't yours any more!"

The following evening Glenn Hackett, having recovered marvelously from his indisposition of the day

before, called for dinner. "The bank gives the man Higuenes most flattering recommendations, Mr. Latham," he announced. "He has plenty of cash and worldly assets and his record is clean. He is known as a man of honor and can be trusted implicitly."

Crooked Bill nodded, as if this report was not a matter of surprise to him. Hackett resumed:

"I cannot go to Texas to attend to this matter of yours, Roberta. It will be necessary to engage a lawyer down there to handle your affairs there, and I suppose Higuenes can direct you to a good one. I imagine you will have to proceed to Los Algodones immediately, and I suggest that when you do you provide yourself with a birth certificate and affidavits proving your relationship to the deceased."

"I shall start tomorrow," Roberta decided, and added maliciously: "I can hardly wait to meet that adorable Jaime Miguel Higuenes!"

CHAPTER II

A SABBATH calm lay upon the hacienda of Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes, lord of the Rancho Valle Verde, notwithstanding the fact that it was not Sunday. The splash of water in a fountain, the occasional chirp of a bird, the faint diapason of insect movement and the occasional complaint of a distant calf lulled, rather than disturbed, the half-formed dreams of the temperamental Don Jaime, where he stretched in a long chair on his cool, red-tiled veranda and gazed out through the arched entrance of his patio toward the distant, blue, serrated hills where the United States of America ended and the Republic of Mexico began. The smoke from a fragrant cigar curled lazily around his dark countenance; from time to time he reached forth to the little table at his side and helped himself to a sip from a highball.

"I wonder," thought Don Jaime presently, "what is going to become of the Higuenes family."

The problem proving too much for him, Don Jaime did that which all of his race do with the utmost ease and without preliminary notice. He fell into a gentle slumber. And while he slept a man on a honey-colored horse with a dark stripe running the length of

his backbone rode up to the hacienda entrance, dismounted, dropped his reins over his horse's neck and strode stiffly through the arched entrance and down the flower-bordered gravel walk to the veranda. Observing Don Jaime at peace in the arms of Morpheus, the stranger removed a full cartridge belt, with two pistols, and hung his armament on one of a row of huge spikes driven into the adobe wall of the house. Quietly he drew another chair alongside Don Jaime, disposed his tired body in it, sighed, caught sight of Don Jaime's highball, which was at least three-quarters present, helped himself to it and drank slowly and with much appreciation.

"By God!" he murmured, setting down the tall glass. "That's good liquor."

"You bet your sweet life that's good liquor," Don Jaime murmured, without troubling to open his eyes. "Who the devil are you?"

"Wake up, you lazy greaser, and see," the visitor retorted.

"Now that you speak in your naturally loud, vulgar and irreverent tone of voice I recognize you. I do not have to look." Don Jaime spoke perfect English, but the faintest clipped accent denoted it was not his mother tongue. He added in Spanish: "Welcome to my poor house. It is yours, gringo."

"I don't want your poor house. All I desire is accommodation and food for my horse and myself until morning and—"

"Thou graceless one!" Don Jaime murmured drowsily but without offense. "But what else can one expect of a Texan—and particularly a Texas ranger?"

"I have never been invited to your poor house," the visitor complained. "I just come anyhow, and of course, once I'm here, you put the best face possible on the matter and bid me welcome. Besides I'm not a Texan. I'm a Californian, and in California we have a habit of asking a thirsty man if he has a mouth. Don't tell me, Jimmy, that I've finished the last of your pre-war Scotch."

"You have. You finished it three years ago, you ungrateful animal," Don Jaime retorted, adverting again to English. "And that highball which you have just pinched from me while I slept is Irish, not Scotch, and reached this country via Mexico. Irish whisky, I find, is not as changeable as the Irish. In the national rush for Scotch, Irish has been forgotten save by those few discerning individuals who still entertain a lingering respect for their viscera. *Kai,* Flavio!"

Bare feet pattered down the hall from the interior of the hacienda. An ancient peon, with just sufficient Castilian blood mingling with the Aztec to arch the bridge of his nose, appeared in the doorway, looked, and disappeared immediately. Presently, he returned with a full bottle, an old silver bucket filled with ice, a bottle of soda and another glass, a box of cigars. The visitor laughed pleasantly.

"Flavio requires no orders when he sees me on the

premises, Jimmy. Any time I stop here he knows I've ridden a hard twenty miles and am tired and thirsty and need a generous pick-up."

"He knows the capacity of Ken Hobart, at any rate." Don Jaime roused and poured a peg for his guest, then helped himself to one. "Indeed, Ken," he assured Hobart, "you are doubly welcome, because you spare me the unspeakable depravity of drinking alone. . . . No, don't worry about the horse. Flavio will send a boy to care for him, and your bath will be ready in an hour. What brings you here?"

"A desire to be neighborly and to offer a slight return for your many evidences of princely hospitality—that and a natural desire to enjoy it again. Since when did you go into the sheep business, Jimmy?"

Don Jaime's dark eyes opened widely and the hint of an ever-ready smile faded from his handsome features, leaving them unbelievably stern. "Where?" he demanded.

"About ten miles south of here. I came across country from San Ysidro and bumped into them on your range. About forty thousand of them, I should say, although I'm no judge of sheep in quantity. There was a camp in a cottonwood grove in a little green valley some two miles farther on. Two men came out and looked at me as if I wouldn't be welcome, so I rode on. I judged the sheep might not be yours. The brand is Circle A."

"Tom Antrim's outfit. Well, if he's only ten miles

from here he's trespassing on my range. Thanks for the information, Ken. Feed is pretty scarce to the east of me and I suppose Tom Antrim got desperate. Yes, you have your uses, gringo."

"If you care to run into Los Algodones and swear to a warrant charging him and John Doe and Richard Roe and James Black and Thomas Green and say a dozen other off-color gents with trespassing, I'll pick those boys up and lodge them in the *juzgado;* then you and your boys can run the sheep off in peace."

"I don't want to run them off in peace, Ken," Don Jaime replied languidly. "I've done that before and it doesn't work. They always come back. Sure you haven't got some other work to do tomorrow?"

"Now, look here, Jimmy," the ranger protested, "you listen to me. Tom Antrim's there to stay. So I'm going to hang around the neighborhood. He's got twenty herders with him and I noticed they all carried rifles. . . . Well, here's mud in your eye."

They drank to each other. "A man's house is his castle," said Don Jaime contemplatively, "and I presume that principle applies to the lands contiguous thereto. One has a right to defend his castle from unwarranted trespass, and I'm here to tell you, old keed, I am very weary of this Tom Antrim and his sheeps—I mean sheep. Damn it, will I never get over the habit of slipping on my plurals, like any Mexican! Three weeks ago the sheriff of this county arrested

Tom Antrim and held him and his men long enough to permit me to drive his sheep off my range; and before I called the sheriff in I talked with Tom Antrim. I told him he must not come back again, because eef—I mean if—he did"—here Don Jaime shrugged eloquent shoulders—"well, I would not bother the sheriff to fight for my rights for me. No, by Santa María la Purísima! It is in the blood of the Higuenes family to fight their own fights."

"Yes, and enjoy them, too."

"We fight in the open," Don Jaime assured him.

"I never said you had any Indian blood in your veins, did I?"

Don Jaime laughed. "I must have the figs in my garden picked," he declared. "The birds are gathering for the feast. Of course the mocking-birds roost in my fig trees and sing sweet songs to me, but the little rascals are too greedy."

"Don't try to switch the conversation," the ranger protested. "From sheep to figs is a jump from the ridiculous to the sublime. I heard all about the famous defi of yours to old Antrim, and I happen to know the old skunk don't take orders worth a cent. Yet, he knows you mean business. That's why his men are all armed. He expects a battle and he knows you'll lead your forces. Now, if you should get killed in the fracas, your executor would be the one to protest against his trespassing in the future. Who might your executor be?"

"The Federal Trust Company of El Paso."

"Tom Antrim owes them a lot of money. In a dry year they might not be too anxious to discover that Antrim was invading your range—that is, not until they had gotten their money out of the old hog. Now I like you, Jimmy, and I don't want to see you get killed. Besides, if you kick up a row and don't get yourself killed, you make work for me and my men. Myself, I'm a man of peace. Consequently it occurred to me—"

"You want me to give him another chance—to appear weak and vacillating by talking to that Antrim again?" Don Jaime charged instantly.

"Thank God, my blood is the cool blood of an Anglo-Saxon ancestry. If I had your hot corpuscles, Friend Jimmy, I never would have risen to be a captain in the Texas rangers. I'd have been killed as a private. Now, you listen to me, because I have no interest at all in Antrim. I have, however, a sympathetic interest in you and your broad acres. You plan to go over yonder and start something. All wrong, old son, all wrong. You take a ranger's advice and let the other fellow draw first. Then beat him to the draw. While that policy is highly dangerous to a dull man, it is the safest for a man who knows how to draw in a hurry and shoot straight. It puts the burden of guilt on the enemy and he and not you usually gets the flowers. Jimmy, knowing the impetuosity of your nature, I have ridden over here to stop you from doing something inartistic."

"You are always my good friend," murmured Don Jaime gratefully.

"Now, listen, Jimmy," Ken Hobart continued. "Tomorrow I shall make it my business to drop in at that sheep camp for luncheon. A little later you will ride up, alone and unarmed. I'll report to Antrim that you're bent on an argument, but not in the smoke; and he'll go out to talk to you, because I shall advise it strongly. When he does you give him final warning in language most becoming to a hidalgo of your proud ancestry. He'll think you're weak and afraid and of course he'll disregard the warning. . . .

"Well, having warned him, you ride back home, gather your gang together and take possession of the water-holes where Antrim must, of necessity, water his sheep tonight. Don't let him water them. He'll fight for the water, rather than back-track with his flock over ground that's been eaten over, only to find your men guarding the water-holes in that direction, too. A sheep can't stand such hardship, and three days without water will see his sheep dying by the thousand.

"You understand me, Jimmy? You provoke the fight but he shoots first. Then you clean up and clean up good, because that's the only way you're ever going to have peace. Antrim's fate will be a lesson to any other grass thief with designs on your range—and I don't think any jury in this county will convict you of murder, because Antrim and his men will have been clearly outside the law, you have a record for patient forbear-

ance in the past, and I will be your witness to prove that you rode up to Antrim's camp unarmed and talked to him like a gentleman—*sabe usted, amigo mío?* A captain of rangers' testimony carries weight with a jury. Anyhow, it just isn't possible to convict a Higuenes in his county. You have never killed anybody or invaded another's rights—and that old buzzard, Antrim, has never done anything else but."

"You are always," Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes reiterated, "my very good friend. And you are as wise as a treeful of owls. You plot with all the consummate craft of my own people."

"Where the devil do you suppose I got my education, if not along the Rio Grande?" Ken Hobart retorted. He lit a cigar and looked out over the pleasant garden. "Gosh, you've got a nice place here, Jimmy. I wish I'd been as discriminating in the selection of my ancestors as you were."

Don Jaime laughed lightly. "Only a little while ago I was reflecting that I have not had opportunity to practice the discrimination evinced by my ancestors in the picking of wives, Friend Hobart," he replied. "If you would be lord of a rancho marry a lady who has one and doesn't know what to do with it. Fortunately, I possess thees—I mean this—rancho, so I do not need the lady!"

"If you did, Jimmy, where the devil would you find her?"

"You have the delightful habit of placing your finger

on the weak spots, my friend. Where, indeed, would I find a suitable wife? I am too busy with thees—I mean this—ranch, and when, once or twice a year I wander to the fleshpots it is to be filled with amazement and fear of what would happen to me if I marry a modern girl."

"You have all of a Castilian's horror of a woman who believes she can take as good care of herself as any man can. I suppose you want a girl who will consent to dwell behind bars, take no exercise and stand for a fat old duenna tagging around behind her, not to see that she avoids romance but to make certain she doesn't act natural and seek it."

"You are wrong, my friend. I am quite modern but a bit old-fashioned, too. I have been in love many times but only in love with love. I must think long and carefully before asking any woman to share this life with me. Here, she would be lonely. She would look from this hacienda to the horizon and see—cattle. She would look back and see—me. One grows weary of scenery. She would come to regard me as a jailer, not a husband. So I must be careful."

"Well, when you meet the girl you truly fall desperately in love with, and she reciprocates your passion—"

"She," quoth Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes solemnly, "shall be the mother of my children."

"Where? Here?"

"Where she will, my friend," Don Jaime replied with simple sincerity.

"Then, Jimmy," said Ken Hobart, "I hope, for purely selfish reasons, you'll meet your fate before long and that she'll refuse to marry you until you sell this ranch and move to Houston or Dallas or San Antone or—"

"The Higuenes men do not take orders from women," Don Jaime interrupted. "And this rancho will never be sold. Four generations of my family have owned it and fought for it. I love it."

"Well, if she asks it, you'll buy her a town house and live there with her part of the year, will you not?"

"Asking is not ordering or delivering ultimatums—"

"Ultimata, Jimmy," the ranger corrected him, mischievously.

"At any rate," Don Jaime resumed, declining the argument, "it would be a delight to be led but hell to be driven."

"Well, when some girl starts leading you, you'll need a good manager for this ranch, Jimmy. I'm growing weary of the reckless, modestly paid life of a ranger . . . at least I could be depended on to keep this range free of sheep."

"There are also bandits from below the Border who raid my cattle. The cemetery of the Rancho Valle Verde has grown fast of late years."

"Border fighting is right up my alley, James, old son."

"As a ranger you fight with the law behind you. You start with a moral victory. But as manager of

this ranch, which God placed too close to the Rio Grande for comfort, you would have to be very careful. It is better to be the head of a mouse than the tail of a lion. However, Friend Ken, if the time should come for me to tie myself to a girl's apron-strings I shall send for you."

Don Jaime lifted from the floor beside his chair a copy of a pretentious magazine devoted to country life in America. "Here is a photograph of a girl," he said, turning the pages indolently, "whose face and figure would cast a halo over Texas. Now, if she were as good and sweet and womanly as she is beautiful—'Miss Roberta Antrim,'" he interrupted himself to read from the caption, "'one of the enthusiastic members of the Westchester County Hunt, mounted on her crack hunter Croppy Boy.' Must be an Irish hunter," Don Jaime opined. "Look at that, Ken, and see if you can work up a cheer or two."

The ranger studied the page casually. "Well, why don't you pull out for Westchester County, New York, secure an introduction to her and see if she's too good to be true or otherwise? At least you'd start with one advantage. She was still unmarried when this magazine went to press."

"One Antrim at a time, Ken. When I've disposed of Tom it will be time to dream of having a look at Roberta."

"You aren't afraid they're related, are you?"

Don Jaime favored his guest with a withering glance.

"A man named Jim Hobart was hanged at Austin last week," he retorted. "Was he a relative of yours—this train robber and murderer?"

"Yes," Ken Hobart answered evenly, "he was my half-brother. And I tracked him and captured him. A black sheep will crop out in the best of regulated families, you know."

Don Jaime's hand caressed that of his friend. "I did not know. I am sorry, my friend."

Ken Hobart turned bleak eyes upon his host. "I want to quit the rangers, Don Jimmy. I wasn't jesting when I said I'd like to be the manager of Rancho Valle Verde if you should ever need me."

"You are the man I have been seeking, Ken. When you reach town tomorrow wire your resignation to the governor of Texas, and as soon as you are released return here."

"Hope you'll be here when I arrive, Jimmy. You've got to fight that Antrim outfit, and when you do, for the Lord's sake be careful. I really want this job."

"If I am still here you will be assistant general manager. If I am not here you will be general manager —and executor of my estate. I will make a new will tonight. Your salary will never be less than the one you enjoy at present. Write your own ticket," he added, with a touch of the tremendous prodigality of his Castilian blood—a prodigality developed to an excess growth doubtless, because of the tremendous inconsequence of his rugged environment.

"Thank you, Don Jaime." Never again would Ken Hobart address his friend as Jimmy, and Don Jaime, realizing this, offered no protest, since to him, to the hacienda born, lord of a million acres and sixty thousand head of cattle, this was as it should be.

"I think," said Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes presently, "that I must start now to pick those figs. The birds are raising the devil with the ripe ones. My great-grandfather planted those figs," he added, with just a touch of pride. "I have been thinking it would be a very great shame if I departed this world leaving none of my line to care for them. . . . Well, now that I shall be tied to this ranch no longer I suppose I must look around. . . ."

He strolled away under the fig trees. . . . To weary, sleepy Ken Hobart there came presently, as from a great distance, the flutelike tones of Don Jaime's whistling; he trilled a mournful waltz that had been composed five hundred years before, inspired by the exit of the Moors from Granada.

"That boy and a gringo flapper would get along together as comfortably as two tom-cats tied tail to tail and thrown over a clothes-line," the ranger decided. "Guess I'll have time for a siesta before Flavio draws my bath. Hum-m-m! Strolling around his old-fashioned garden, picking ripe figs and dreaming of his proud ancestors and his duty to posterity. And within forty-eight hours there's at least a fifty per cent chance he'll be dead! Good lad! He's one of the last survivors

of a fast disappearing race. . . . Guess I'll have to arrange to be present at the battle of the water-holes, even though I may shoot myself out of a good job as general manager of Rancho Valle Verde. . . . What's the odds? I'll let the tail go with the hide. . . . Tom Antrim's got to go!"

CHAPTER III

DON JAIME made a new will that night and handed it to Ken Hobart at breakfast the following morning. "Your instructions are all in that envelop, too," he explained, "in case I should be unfortunate. Enrico Caraveo, my riding boss, has the run of things pretty well. He's a good man, and a Caraveo has always been riding boss of the Rancho Valle Verde. I shouldn't want you to make a change, Ken.

"I have some Mexican first cousins; they're émigrés, living in Los Angeles, and I'm leaving them the ranch in trust, with you as trustee and manager. The revolutions have ruined them and I support them now. Socially, I'm proud of them, but the fact remains that they're damned spendthrifts, and if they had their way they'd sell this ranch and the cattle for fifty cents on the dollar in order to start splurging again. And a Mexican grandee is much too conscientious a splurger to continue on the job indefinitely. Consequently I, with my acquired American conservatism, must look after the poor devils."

"Don Jaime," Hobart protested, "I'm your employee now. I'll wire the governor of Texas my resignation and, without waiting for its acceptance, I'll ride back

in time to be present when Antrim's sheep come to the guarded water-holes."

Don Jaime smiled. "As you will, Ken. While I require no additional proof that I have made no mistake in hiring you, still"—he shrugged and grimaced as only a Latin can—"it is nice to have it. As you know, we of the Higuenes tribe are easy-going people. We do not require the services of supermen, for we have never had them, but we have been accustomed to loyalty. Because I know you are loyal to your job I have engaged you."

"Thank you, Don Jaime."

They rode away into the southeast together. In a clump of cottonwoods a hundred yards from the sheep camp they parted, Don Jaime waiting while the ranger rode into the camp of the invaders.

A smallish, unprepossessing man, who might have been anywhere from forty-five to sixty years of age, stood under a smoke-discolored fly over a small barbecue pit upon which a side of mutton was roasting. As the ranger rode up, this man placed his arms akimbo, and gazed alertly at the stranger.

"All set for a quick grab for his gun," Ken Hobart reasoned. "Wily old wretch!" Aloud he said, "Good morning, Mr. Antrim."

"Hello, yourself," Antrim replied with an assumption of heartiness. "What's your name when lunch is ready?"

Hobart grinned. "I'm Captain Hobart, of the Texas Rangers. I suspected luncheon might be ready about the time I was due to ride by, so I've invited myself."

"You're welcome, ranger. What's the gossip around your way?"

Hobart dismounted and tied his horse to the breeze. "Nothing much. A little smuggling, a little gun-running, a cattle raid to vary the monotony, a killing. Things are pretty quiet along the Border."

"What brings you up this way?" Antrim was suspicious as a predatory animal.

"I figured on giving you some sound advice, Mr. Antrim. You're trespassing on the Higuenes lands and Don Jaime Higuenes doesn't cheer for that. It looks like a private war to me; and as a ranger I prefer to stop a private war before it starts rather than after it's started. You're in the wrong, Mr. Antrim, and I advise you to pull out of here and not come back."

"You come to arrest me for trespassing," Antrim asked.

"No, of course not. You're grazing your sheep on state lands. I can't arrest you until you drive them on the lands owned by Don Jaime in fee simple—and those lands surround the water-holes whereby Don Jaime controls this range. Even then I'll not arrest you, because Don Jaime refuses to ask it or swear out a warrant. Says he likes to kill his own rats."

"Called me a rat, did he?" Antrim's cold, pale-blue eyes were very bleak.

"Not at all. That was just my way of expressing the situation. I was speaking in the vernacular. Don Jaime isn't very far from here, Mr. Antrim. He'd like to have one final talk with you. He isn't armed. Suppose you drop that gun you're wearing and walk out with me to discuss this situation with Don Jaime."

"Reckon I can trust a ranger," Antrim replied, as Hobart exposed his shield. He hung his gun and belt on the projecting snag of a cottonwood and followed the ranger to where Don Jaime Higuenes waited.

"Well, Higuenes," Antrim saluted him gruffly. His words, his tone of voice, were at once an inquiry and a threat.

"I've come to warn you not to attempt to water your sheep at any of my water-holes, Antrim."

"And if I do?"

"You'll fight to the death for the privilege."

"Well, I can do that, too."

"Then we understand each other."

"How do I know you own those water-holes?"

"You have my assurance that I do. If you doubt that, look up the records at the county seat."

"Your surveys are wrong."

"I am not aware of that. Of course, if they are, you may water your sheep—after you've proved your statement. However, your argument is footless. You do not wish to believe me and I wouldn't believe you under oath. So suppose we have the county surveyor out here to resurvey all the lands I hold in fee simple. If he

proves the old surveys to be erroneous, I'll pay his bill. If he proves them correct, you pay his bill, move out with your sheep and never come back."

"I'm not taking orders from any damned greaser."

Don Jaime's white teeth flashed in a smile of vast amusement. "No intelligent man takes a civet cat in his hands, Antrim. I have warned you, in the presence of Captain Hobart, not to trespass on the lands I hold in fee simple."

Without a word Antrim turned and walked back to his camp.

"It's war," said Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes.

"The man must be a trifle insane, Don Jaime."

"Not at all. He's running a bluff because he thinks I'm weak. He is willing to be arrested for trespass, provided his sheep may drink. He will bail himself out of jail—all his men, too—and trespass again and again. The season is a dry one and the feed on his own range is depleted. He must get through the summer some way and hold his flock intact. . . . Well, I'll ride back home and organize my defense."

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Don Jaime. I shall. As assistant general manager it is my duty to command. Besides, I know how. Your life is much too precious to risk it in a brush with these sheepmen. Arrests and trials will follow this fight, and if you are not alive to protect your men, who, then, will protect us? Who will bail us out of jail?"

Don Jaime smiled his lazy smile. It was easy to see

he was very fond of the ranger. "There is sound reason in your argument," he admitted.

Hobart went on.

"Permit me to return to the hacienda and organize your forces, Don Jaime. Meanwhile, you ride on to Los Algodones and file my telegraphic resignation to the governor. Here it is. I wrote it out last night. It requests immediate acceptance by wire. The governor is a friend of mine and will do this. Wait for the answer. Meanwhile, make your arrangements to provide bail for twelve of your men. What men do you advise for this expedition?"

Don Jaime named them promptly, and Hobart realized that the force he was to defend the water-holes with was equally divided between Mexicans and Americans.

"Now, then," Hobart continued, "we're going to lick the Antrim crowd, and some of them and perhaps some of us are going to get killed. More of them, I think. The survivors will prefer a charge of murder against any of the men they have recognized during the fight, and the bail will be about twenty-five thousand dollars each in cash or fifty thousand in bonds. We will assume that four of our men will be recognized. That means you must provide one hundred thousand in cash or two hundred thousand in bonds."

"I'm good for that in bonds."

"Well, then, make your arrangement in advance with the district attorney. You'll be in Los Algodones this

afternoon, all night and tomorrow forenoon. Tomorrow afternoon you will ride back, with the sheriff, who will be on his way out to your ranch to arrest your men. You will have a perfect alibi, because this fight will have been pulled off in your absence, so you will be quite free to look after the comforts of your defenders."

Don Jaime pondered. He much preferred, when his men were in danger defending the master's interests, to share that danger with them. On the other hand he realized that the issue was not to be fought entirely at the water-holes; that in the courts he would be needed much more than in any other arena of battle. He knew Ken Hobart was talking sense, and that the sensible thing to do would be to heed his advice. So he heeded it. And in heeding it he experienced no qualms of conscience, no feeling that he was playing safe while others fought his battles.

The employees of the Rancho Valle Verde were scarcely employees in the modern sense. Rather were they retainers, fierce partizans of the Higuenes tradition, men to whom it was a religion to fight for the master in defense of their bread and butter. This tribute of loyalty the ancestors of Don Jaime had demanded as a right; with the passage of time it had come to be accorded without compulsion and become a commonplace thing, to be accepted as Don Jaime accepted hot weather and cold, good fortune and evil.

"Very well, Ken," he agreed. "Enrico Caraveo

knows every foot of this range; once he locates the sheep he'll know what water they will try for this evening. The rest I leave to you. Perhaps you had better loan me your rifle, in case I should run into some of Antrim's herders after leaving you here. When you return to the ranch help yourself to my arsenal. I have every brand of rifle my foolish fancy coveted; select the one you like best, then let your men help themselves. Better use steel-jacketed bullets. I have dum-dum ammunition for use on the bandits that favor me with an occasional raid, but a sheep-herder is such a pitiful creature, perhaps we had better be as kind as we can."

He helped himself to the ranger's rifle and scabbard and fastened it along his saddle. It was a Mauser carbine, and the ammunition was carried in clips of five in pockets on a buckskin vest. Don Jaime donned the vest and, with a nod to the ranger, headed his horse across country in the direction of Los Algodones.

It was some months since he had ridden a horse. For many years his trips around his ranch, between his ranch and the county seat had been made by automobile. He paused now, thinking of the twenty-mile ride back to the ranch; deciding he would spare himself that hardship he shouted to Hobart:

"Ken, send one of the boys into Los Algodones with the motor and the horse trailer attached, to bring my horse and me home."

"Seguro," Hobart shouted back.

CHAPTER IV

DON JAIME rode his horse along the side of the valley, gradually climbing to the summit of the hilly range on its southern boundary. Here he paused and looked off to the rolling lands below. They were dotted with sheep, standing in long rows a dozen deep, head to head, cropping the dry feed to the grass roots and trampling the roots with their sharp small hoofs. The complaining bleat of the lambs created a continuous diapason of discord.

It was true that the lands whereon the Antrim sheep grazed were not the property of Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes. They were state lands (for Texas never surrendered her public lands to the Federal government) and, undoubtedly, Antrim had as legal a right to graze his sheep there as Don Jaime had to graze his cattle. Nevertheless, by custom and usage, it had come to be known as the Higuenes range. Don Jaime's grandfather had purchased with cheap land scrip the acreage along the watercourses and around the springs, and by this control of the water the Higuenes dynasty had for generations exercised nominal control over the public lands adjacent thereto. And, since this was a common practice, regarded as an adroit business move but

never as a wanton usurpation of the public domain, cattlemen and most sheepmen had respected the Higuenes control.

For the grass on this controlled range the Higuenes family paid nothing. There was an unending dispute between them and the surveyor-general, who sought from their use of the land some revenue to the state. To the state's feeble charge of trespass by the Higuenes cattle, the reigning Higuenes had always replied with a polite offer to bear half of the expense of fencing the lands it held in fee contiguous to the state lands and thus prevent trespass. Since this constituted a fair and reasonable, nay, legal, method of adjusting trespass disputes between individuals, the reigning Higuenes had always held that the state should also accept his proposition. The state, considering this, discovered that the expense of fifty miles of fence would not be warranted on the hypothesis that any revenue would subsequently accrue by reason of the sale of grazing permits on the fenced lands of the state, since, with the Higuenes family controlling all the waterways and waterholes, no man would be foolish enough to seek a grazing permit! Pending the adjustment of this ancient dispute therefore, the matter slumbered officially at Austin, the state capital, and Don Miguel Jaime Higuenes neglected to fence his fee lands contiguous to the water; also he neglected to supply herders to confine his cattle to his fee lands, wherefore they wandered over the state lands at will!

Of this situation wily old Tom Antrim had decided to take advantage. In ordinary years he would not have risked the adventure, since nobody knew better than he that a dispute over water and grass in that country is always tantamount to an adventure. But his own range had been grazed over; it had been a dry year in his part of the county, he had the sheep on his hands, they were not ready for market, nor was he ready to accept the market price for unmarketable sheep. He had to maintain them, and in his dilemma he turned quite naturally to one of the earliest laws of human nature, to wit, that a desperate man is justified in taking desperate measures.

He was familiar with the law of trespass. If the owner of fee lands did not fence them he could not prosecute successfully the owner of loose live stock that wandered thereon! And Don Jaime Higuenes could not afford to fence the small acreage around springs and water-holes and the narrow forty-acre strips along watercourses, some of which went dry in the summer. If he did his own live stock could not get in for water! Of course, as Antrim knew, Don Jaime might have counterattacked by scattering quantities of saltpeter on the grass of his fee lands. They were his lands and he could put saltpeter on them if he desired. Saltpeter will not hurt cattle, but it kills sheep. However, when Antrim figured the area upon which his antagonist would have to scatter sufficient saltpeter to be a menace, he knew Don Jaime would never resort to this expedient.

It would require too much saltpeter and too great a labor bill to scatter it and maintain it in sufficient quantities to do its work.

Therefore, Antrim reasoned, he ran but one risk, and that was a battle to keep his sheep, not from trespassing on unfenced lands, but from drinking Don Jaime's water. However, there were many water-holes and many watercourses to guard, and perhaps Don Jaime would not guard them all; perhaps if Antrim appeared with a strong armed guard of herders Don Jaime would not force the issue. Under the circumstances Tom Antrim decided to accept the risks, because the stakes, if he won, were high. He was an arrogant man and because of Don Jaime's Castilian blood (Antrim referred to it as Mexican blood, which predicates a mixture of Indian) he had a contempt for the fighting qualities of the Higuenes family. He had declared, often in public, that Don Jaime was too yellow to buck a white man. Like most Americans of his ilk he chose, having no other virtues to speak of, to assume that of a superior blood, a superior color.

All these things Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes considered as he gazed over the country that, by hook and crook, had been sacred to four generations of his people. He had but one real advantage, one legal right. His fee lands were unfenced and hence a suit for trespass could not lie, but he did have the right to drive trespassing live stock off his fee lands before they should have an opportunity to drink. If held off long

enough they would perish of thirst, and if while driving them off he and his men were attacked by the owners of the trespassing live stock they would be clearly within their legal rights if they defended themselves.

Don Jaime smiled. "Thrice doubly armed is he whose cause is just," he soliloquized. "Well, Señor Antrim has the surprise of his life coming to him this evening. He's staked everything on a lone ace—and I'm going to take the trick with a trump deuce."

He decided to bear off to the right and give the sheep and their herders a wide berth, for he had no intention of coming to grips with the enemy anywhere except on his own lands and in defense of his inalienable rights. So he rode along the hogback at a walk for half a mile and then turned down a long draw to the valley below, through which the white road to Los Algodones wound off into the haze. At the mouth of the draw he paused and dismounted, for the long trip downhill had revealed the fact that his saddle cinch was loose; it had slipped out over the horse's withers.

Don Jaime removed saddle and blanket, saw that there were no wrinkles in the blanket, and adjusted it again to the horse's back. He was in the act of swinging the heavy stock saddle up onto the animal when something ripped across his breast. He felt a gentle plucking of his shirt, experienced a feeling that he had been burned. Then the crashing sound of a rifle echoed through the draw.

The thought flashed through Don Jaime's agile brain, "Tom Antrim had another trump. He's playing it."

With a savage wrench he jerked Ken Hobart's rifle clear of the boot, dropped the saddle and leaped for the brush with the alacrity of a frightened rabbit. A fusillade of bullets followed him; before he could gain the shelter of the reverse slope of the left of the two spurs which formed the draw, he had been hit three times, the last wound dropping him headlong on his face.

The paralysis was but momentary, however. He rolled a couple of times, half rose, lurched forward and rolled again. When he reached "dead" ground, he rested a few seconds, then on his hands and knees crawled around the toe of the spur; presently he got to his feet and limped slowly and painfully up the hill fifty yards, got down on his hands and knees, and with his body as close to the earth as possible crawled back through the low sage over the spur toward the draw! When he could look down into the draw again he stretched out and brought his rifle to the ready. He waited.

Presently, up the hillside across the draw he saw a bush move slightly. There was not a breath of wind, so Don Jaime concentrated his attention on that bush. It moved again, but Don Jaime could see nothing. So, deciding to feel for what was there while yet sufficient strength remained to him, he sighted carefully on the center of that bush and fired. Something threshed in the brush, so Don Jaime continued to shoot until the threshing ceased.

With the feeling that he had better be sure than sorry he had put twenty bullets into the heart of that bush.

Presently, from far up the draw toward the summit a voice floated faintly:

"Don Jaime! It's Ken Hobart!"

"Come down, but be careful," Don Jaime shouted back with all his lungs.

Ken Hobart came down that long draw at a mad gallop and when the thud of hoofs indicated his near presence, Don Jaime managed to stand erect and hail him. The ranger rode into the brush to Don Jaime, who leaned against his horse and clung to the saddle.

"Hurt, my friend?"

"Shot all to hell but not fatally," Don Jaime informed him with a wry smile. "Top of the left shoulder, left biceps and calf of the right hind leg. Also a brand across my chest."

"Where's the other man?"

Don Jaime indicated the spot and then sat down to wait while the ranger rode up to investigate. The ranger's face was gravely humorous when he returned.

"There's a man up there lying on top of a rifle. An oldish man. Looks like Tom Antrim—that is, dressed like him, but you've shot his head practically away and he's unrecognizable. Features quite obliterated."

"While waiting for something or somebody to turn up I didn't have anything else to do, so I practiced shooting," Don Jaime protested virtuously. "My horse still there?"

"Yes, standing where you left him."

"Good old Border horse. Shooting never flusters him. Well, Ken, you'd better undress me and take an inventory; then get me on my horse and hold me there. It's ten miles back to the ranch but I can make it if I don't bleed to death."

Hobart carried him out to the clean grass in the draw, undressed him and examined his wounds with the skill of one to whom wounds are no mystery. "Top shoulder muscle ripped and possibly a piece drilled out of the scapula. Hole through the left biceps but the humerus is untouched. Leg wound nothing to write home about. All flesh wounds; blood just welling slowly. It will probably coagulate and quit in a little while," he announced casually.

He brought iodin, bandages and adhesive tape from his saddle-bags, for like all of his profession he had frequent need of such things and was not a half-bad backwoods surgeon. When he had the wounds dressed and the arm in a sling Don Jaime stood erect and gingerly rested his weight on his wounded leg. "Not any worse than a badly sprained ankle," he rejoiced, "and I've walked miles on one of them. . . . Well, let's have a look at the sassy old sheep-herder."

With Hobart's assistance he mounted his horse, and together they rode up the opposite slope and gazed down at the dead man. "I could see a small glint of something white," Don Jaime explained, "after I fired the first time. I figured it might be his face, so I pecked away at it."

"I never knew a man with Spanish blood in his veins who wasn't ferocious," the ranger declared.

"I'm not ferocious. I'm practical, Ken. I wanted to keep on shooting to show any other bushwhackers who might be in on the job that I was armed and dangerous. And I thought, too, a lot of shooting might bring some of those herders from over yonder and I'd get enough for a mess. And why waste my shots?"

"Well, your extravagance with ammunition is what brought me direct to the scene. I'd ridden about half a mile from where we parted when it occurred to me that Antrim and his camp cook could easily have heard you directing me to have one of the boys come into Los Algodones with the auto and the trailer to bring your horse home. Remember? You shouted. So he'd know you were traveling across country alone and unarmed —for of course he could not know that as a mere matter of precaution you had borrowed my rifle. I just got a hunch it would be like the old scoundrel to follow and bushwhack you. He could be reasonably certain there would be no witnesses."

Don Jaime gazed down at the grisly thing in the bushes. "Looks like Antrim—all but the face," he agreed. "Frisk him, Ken, in your capacity as a peace officer, and see what luck we have."

So the ranger turned the dead man's pockets inside out and in the coat pocket he found a black seal-leather wallet bearing on the outside the words in gold letters: "Thomas Antrim, Christmas, 1925."

"Somebody, strange as it may seem, actually thought enough of this man to give him a Christmas present," the ranger murmured. "Here's a photo post-card addressed to Thomas Antrim, Jolon, Las Cruces County, Texas. Picture of a girl taken at Atlantic City. Now, where have I seen that face before?"

He handed the card up to Don Jaime, who studied it briefly and handed it back.

"Miss Roberta Antrim, of Hillcrest, Dobbs Ferry, Westchester County, New York," he announced grimly. "So she was a relative of his, after all." He sighed. "What else, old-timer?"

"A letter in an envelop."

"As a peace officer you have a right to read it."

The ranger complied with Don Jaime's suggestion. "Brief letter from Roberta Antrim, addressed to 'Dear Uncle Tom,' and thanking him for sending her a check for five dollars for the Babies' Hospital."

"He gave up all of one lamb, didn't he? Generous man!"

"Here's a card that says: 'In case of death or accident please notify my next of kin, Miss Roberta Antrim,' etc. Well, it sort of looks like old Tom's made a mess of things. He was too old to have attempted to do this job himself. His eyes probably weren't as good as they used to be, and when a fellow takes to bushwhacking he ought to be reasonably fast and accurate with a rifle. When you borrowed my rifle you sort of spilled old Tom's beans, Don Jaime."

"His sheep we still have with us, also his foreman and sheep-herders," Don Jaime announced thoughtfully. "I suppose his sheep are now the property of his next of kin, and God forbid that I should wage war on a woman. Ken, my friend, I think we'll defer the war of the water-holes. The sensible thing to do now is to wire Miss Roberta Antrim to get down here on the job and look after the assets of her late Uncle Tom. She's a lady. She'll probably listen to reason and we'll get rid of these stinking sheep without additional bloodshed. They'll ruin a lot of the range in the interim, of course— Oh, hell, let 'em drink! If we shoo them off now they'll die and that would be putting a crimp in the lady's bankroll."

"Whatever else we may be, let us, at least, try to be gentlemen," the ranger agreed humorously. "Well, now, the next business before the meeting is to find old Tom's horse, drape Thomas across the saddle, take him into Los Algodones and deliver him to the local undertaker. My report of this affair will close the investigation. And you should get to a doctor. It's ten miles to your ranch and ten miles to Los Algodones. I'm in command! All aboard for Los Algodones, *amigo mío.*"

They had proceeded but a short distance along the narrow, rutty road to Los Algodones when they were overtaken by a man driving an old automobile that had been converted into a truck. Hearing it rattling along behind them, the ranger rode his horse into the

middle of the road and held up his hand. The vehicle stopped.

The ranger looked the driver over. "I know you," he announced. "Aren't you Tom Antrim's camp cook? Seems to me I saw you at his camp this noon."

The man glanced from the ranger to Antrim's horse, with Antrim's limp body hanging across the saddle; his dark face paled as he saw the dead man's head bundled up in his canvas coat.

"What's happened?" he cried. "That dead man's my boss, ain't he?"

"He used to be. He rode out of his camp in a devil of a hurry shortly after I was there, you may remember. Well, his mission was to circle around Señor Higuenes, waylay and murder him. He tried very hard to succeed, as you may judge by a casual inspection of Señor Higuenes, but somehow his proposition back-fired and now he's on his way to the undertaker. I suppose you're bound for Los Algodones for supplies?"

The man nodded, his eyes still on all that was mortal of the man who had paid him well for doing very indifferent cooking.

"Well, suppose we dispose Antrim's body on your truck. He keeps shifting in the saddle and making as great a nuisance of himself in death as he did in life. I'm afraid he'll fall off. Don Jaime will ride on the seat beside you and I'll sit on back with the corpse and lead these two horses. You got a gun on you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Give it to me. You might be tempted to use it on Don Jaime. Hop out now and pay the last sad tribute of love to your late boss."

"I don't think I'll go to Los Algodones after all, ranger. The boys ought to be notified of this killing—"

"You'll go. I desire it, my friend. I don't feel like having your friends organize a reprisal raid on the Rancho Valle Verde until I'm there to receive them." Hobart flashed his ranger's shield on the man who, without further ado, assisted him to place Antrim's body in the box of the car. Hobart then lifted Don Jaime down from his horse and deposited him beside the driver, after which he seated himself in the rear of the car and with his long legs hanging out the tailgate held the leading ropes of the three horses. At a speed of seven or eight miles an hour they proceeded to Los Algodones, where Hobart turned Antrim's body over to the coroner and made his report to the sheriff, having first seen Don Jaime in bed at the hotel with a doctor in charge of him.

About an hour later a coroner's jury trooped into Don Jaime's room and listened to his story of the killing. The ranger added his testimony, and the foreman of the jury looked humorously at his fellow jurors.

"Don't seem to be anything mysterious about this case, boys," he announced. "All those in favor of rendering a verdict of suicide hold up their right hands.

All up? We, the jury, find that the deceased came to his death at the hands of Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes and that the said Higuenes acted in self-defense and cannot be charged with any crime worse than justifiable homicide."

"I thank you, señores," said Don Jaime. "Ken, take the jury down to the hotel bar and set up the drinks. Champagne if they have it. They usually do—for me! Los Algodones is too close to the Border to be a dry town. Don't stop at one round, Ken. Now that you are the assistant general manager of the Rancho Valle Verde it's up to you to maintain our traditions of hospitality. Go 'way, you chaps. I'm not in sufficient pain to groan, but I'd like to cuss freely for a while."

The jury retired in an atmosphere of profound geniality, and when Ken Hobart had sufficiently upheld the traditions of Valle Verde he returned to his employer.

"Well, I've wired my resignation. It ought to reach the governor before the office closes, and his wire of acceptance will come to me in your care. I've hired an automobile—at your expense, Don Jaime—and am on my way to the ranch. I'll send the trailer in after our horses in the morning. They're at ranger headquarters. That cook of Antrim's is bound to have taken the news out to his people. . . . I'd better be at the ranch in the event of hostilities. The wildest sheep-herder will generally listen to reason from a ranger—and I'll be a ranger until my resignation is accepted and I have turned in my shield."

Don Jaime held out a telegram to him. "Please file that as you go out, Ken. The doctor has sent to El Paso for a trained nurse, and as soon as she arrives I'll go out to the ranch and recuperate. All I require is an expert to dress these punctures and keep an eye out for possible infection. As for those sheeps—I mean sheep—tell Antrim's foreman to restrict them to the country south of the Arroyo San Dieguito. The feed there isn't so attractive to my cattle anyhow, but sheep can make a living there. *Adiós, mi buen compañero.*"

CHAPTER V

ALTHOUGH she had promised Crooked Bill she would start for Los Algodones immediately, such was her curiosity to meet the adorable Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes, Roberta Antrim awakened the following morning with a changed mind. Roberta was like that. During the night she had permitted her thoughts to dwell upon the matter of the long, hot journey to Los Algodones and decided that the Border town, in June, would not be to her liking. She hadn't the slightest idea of the size of her late uncle's estate, but for a reason she could not analyze she believed it to be inconsiderable. Regardless of its size, however, she asked herself what beneficent purpose could she serve by going down there now. The Higuenes man had volunteered to look after her interests, the bank had recommended him highly, so why not permit him to be as neighborly as he wished! In all probability Uncle Tom's estate could afford to pay him well for his trouble. At any rate, she would have to do some shopping before she started.

Her first rush of enthusiasm, engendered by Don Jaime's telegram and the vivid mental picture she had painted of him, was fading; in its place was growing

an apprehension that Crooked Bill was probably right as usual. The estimable Don Jaime might prove to be a Pancho Villa sort of person physically, despite his undoubted mental attainments, and Roberta felt she did not care to risk such disillusionment until she had to.

Crooked Bill, knowing his niece far better than she knew herself, was quite prepared for this change of mind. So he said nothing beyond a mild inquiry as to what reply she had sent Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes to his charming telegram.

"Oh, I just thanked him and told him I would be happy to have him look after my interests until I could find a man to relieve him, at which time he would be remunerated for his work. I also asked him to send me a detailed account of the manner in which Uncle Tom met his death and instructed him to have Uncle Tom buried in the local cemetery and send the bill to me."

"Hum-m!" Crooked Bill's grunt was very skeptical. "Did you ask him for any information regarding your Uncle Tom's estate?"

"No, Uncle Bill. I thought you'd look after those details for me."

"I will, honey, but I must remind you that I have a few details of my own that require looking after. I'm up to my eyebrows in General Motors and if the market goes against me (and I don't like the looks of it) I'm liable to have to go down to Texas, take hold of your Uncle Tom's sheep business and try to eke out a

respectable existence for both of us. I suppose you'd give me a job as your manager, wouldn't you, Bobby?"

Roberta's eyes widened. "Surely, Uncle Bill, you're jesting."

"I'm not. Neither am I lugubrious, my dear. It will be time enough for that when I invite my creditors in to gather up the pieces."

"You're a strange mixture of optimism and pessimism, Uncle Bill. Are you really deep in the market?"

"I have already told you I'm in General Motors up to my eyebrows. I have a few other lines, but General Motors is the stock that won't let your Uncle Bill sleep well lately. You see, Bobby, when one plays on margin and sells short, he makes a dollar a share every time the price drops a point; if he buys short he loses a dollar a share every time the price mounts a point. And the brokers keep calling for more margin. . . . Well, I bought five thousand shares at 110—"

"Five hundred and fifty thousand dollars," Roberta interrupted to prove she was following Crooked Bill's tale with interest.

"Well, the dog-gone stock has gone up to a hundred and ninety—"

"A loss of eighty points—four hundred thousand dollars! Oh, Uncle Bill!"

"Of course there's bound to be a break sometime. A miracle is bound to occur, provided I carry the load indefinitely. If the stock keeps advancing, the fellow who has sold five thousand shares short faces the daily

job of digging up anywhere from five to twenty thousand dollars additional margin. There's such a thing as reaching the point where one has no more margin available, and when that point is reached one's broker just naturally plays safe and sells one out and one is busted."

Roberta came to the old man and put her fair arms around his leathery neck. "I'm Uncle Tom's heir. At least he wrote me to that effect once when he was very ill—"

"The time he was shot by his foreman in a quarrel over participating profits, you mean."

"—so if you go bust, Uncle Bill, you can have Uncle Tom's sheep."

"A terrible heritage," Crooked Bill replied, and shuddered. "Well, we'll hope for the best, honey."

"Of course you can sell now and pocket your loss, can you not?"

"A true sport never knows a regret, Bobby. He always protects his bets. I think I'll sell out my line of cotton and steel today and use my considerable profit to protect my other trades." Crooked Bill Latham hung his head and wiped his eyes carefully. "Seeing what a sport you are, Bobby, I find courage to tell you something. I've sold Hillcrest—that is, I've given my bankers a deed under an agreement to file it for record in case I fail to meet my obligations to the bank—and if that inside crowd keeps on shoving General Motors up and up—"

"How did you happen to get into this awful predicament?" Roberta almost screamed. "Uncle Bill Latham, why didn't you get out of the market and stay out when you made your big clean-up just after Coolidge was elected? You had all the money you would ever need then."

"I thought I ought to have a little more—for you, my dear. The cost of living mounts daily, it seems to me."

"Whatever happens we'll be brave about it, old dear," Roberta assured him tenderly. "There, there, Uncle Bill. Buck up now. Whatever goes up must come down, you know. This stock will reach its peak and get out of control of the manipulators, and then the big break will come. I don't know anything about the stock market except what I've read in novels, but in novels, when the break comes, prices always go far below the price at which the villains bought and they're ruined."

"I tell you, Bobby, I'm so nervous about that General Motors stock I'm afraid to go into New York, for fear I'll find myself a babbling idiot when I step off the train at Grand Central Station. Anything can happen in this market, and I don't know what to do."

"Perhaps an old-fashioned Bourbon cocktail would help, darling," Roberta suggested, and went to prepare it herself. Worn and harassed as he was by his adventures in Wall Street, Crooked Bill nevertheless was sufficiently interested in the quality of his alcoholic nutriment to stand by and watch the operation. Peculiar

man, Crooked Bill. A drop too much of Angostura could ruin an evening for him.

"I felt pretty badly when you and Glenn had your bust-up the other night," he went on, between sips. "I had hoped to see you settled for life. What happens to me doesn't matter. A man can lie down in the cactus, but a woman must be protected."

"You darling! I'm devoted to Glenn Hackett, but I'm sure I don't love him—that is, enough to marry him. Until death do us part is quite a long while, you know. I'd have to have some romance to help me along the road of married life and you *know* Glenn Hackett is *not* romantic."

"No, but he has hoss sense and a fine honor and a bankroll that keeps on swelling. He's conservative. You'd be safe with him."

"But I don't want to be safe, silly. I'm young; I want to see something of life; I want adventure and romance, and it isn't found in Glenn Hackett's set."

"Texas is the largest state in the Union—there's plenty of room for romance there. How about this romantic person Jaime Miguel Higuenes?"

"I'm afraid I might not care for him after all, Uncle Bill. I've made up my mind never to become interested in a Latin. They're so explosive and emotional and tyrannical; they kiss each other—the men, I mean—and weep at things an American would find humorous."

"Well, I'll admit they're the short end of the bet, Bobby. However, you or your legal representative will

have to go to Texas soon and do something about those sheep. Sheep can become a frightful nuisance, even to a good-natured man, which providentially this Higuenes man appears to be. The herders require their monthly wage, otherwise they will abandon the sheep, and an abandoned sheep is the doggonedest most abandoned critter on earth. Coyotes will take a hand; wolves and panther will help; sheep have a habit of getting scabby; lambs acquire infected tails and maggots start there and eat slowly toward the head; the wool crop is to be thought of. How do we know whether your Uncle Tom sheared his sheep this summer or not? Now that he's dead his herders may steal some of the sheep, if not all. Did he or did he not make a will, and if so, who is the executor?"

"I do wish, Uncle Bill, that you would go down there and attend to these matters. I'll give you my power of attorney."

"What!" Crooked Bill almost yelled. "With the market skyrocketing and every dollar I have in the world tied up in it? Impossible!"

"If Glenn Hackett loved me half as much as he started to tell me he did, he'd go down there for me."

"He has half a dozen very important cases demanding his attention here. Why should he neglect clients who pay him huge fees to chase off on your business after the way you've treated him? Besides, he wouldn't have the hardihood to send you a bill for half what the trip would actually cost him."

Since Roberta made no reply to this charge it occurred to her crafty uncle that in her heart of hearts she knew she had not treated Glenn Hackett as nicely as he deserved.

"I have so many lovely things planned, Uncle Bill. To go down to Texas now would quite ruin my summer," she protested.

"Not to go will probably ruin the same summer for Jaime Miguel Higuenes, Bobby."

"Probably, too, it will not. He's accustomed to Texas summers, I take it."

"But not to playing nursemaid to the Lord knows not how many sheep for a person he doesn't even know. After one look at you he might derive considerable pleasure from his kindly act, but in the absence of any interest on your part he may be tempted to deny your sheep the mother's care all sheep require."

"But I do not know that I am heir to those sheep. Can't you wait until a will is unearthed or the absence of one definitely established? Glenn brought up that point yesterday. If there is no will I shall, of course, as Uncle Tom's next to kin, petition for letters of administration, but until I have a letter from Señor Higuenes it seems to me I can do nothing but mark time."

"Very well, then, mark time. That's what I'm doing and it's driving me crazy."

CHAPTER VI

IT was a week before the expected letter arrived from Jaime Miguel Higuenes. Having perused it, Roberta handed it to Crooked Bill, who was in such a hurry to read it he forgot to put on his spectacles.

Rancho Valle Verde, Las Cruces Co., Texas.
June 28, 1925.

Dear Miss Antrim:

Supplementing my telegram of a week ago I regret to report that on the 21st inst. your Uncle, Thomas Antrim, as the aftermath of a dispute that arose due to your uncle's alleged trespass with his sheep on lands not owned by him, engaged in a duel with rifles on the range some ten miles from Los Algodones. His antagonist, one Jim Higgins, emerged the victor in this sanguinary affray. From the testimony of the latter, in addition to that of a ranger who arrived on the scene immediately following the unfortunate incident, it appears, much as I regret to say so, that Mr. Antrim was very much the aggressor. In fact Higgins was wounded three times by your relative before he found himself in position to return the fire. The ranger brought Higgins and the body of your

uncle to Los Algodones, the county seat, where the coroner's jury returned a verdict of justifiable homicide.

In accordance with your telegraphic instructions I have seen to it that your uncle received Christian burial in Odd Fellows Cemetery.

Your uncle was well known to me. We had a community of interest in many things, so when at his untimely passing no one came forward to perform the last sad rites I took it upon myself to notify you. It has been a pleasure to me to have served you.

Being at this time confined to my home with a slight indisposition, I directed my general manager to call upon your uncle's foreman in charge of some 40,000 sheep on the range and inform him that it was your wish, as the probable heir to your uncle's estate, that he continue to carry on with the sheep until the arrival of you or your representative here. The foreman, a man named Bill Dingle, impressed my foreman as being a bit recalcitrant. He mentioned having a contract with your uncle to participate to a certain extent in the latter's sheep business and stated that he was not taking orders from anybody. My manager thereupon showed him your telegram to me, conveying your request that I act as your representative temporarily. This written display of authority had little or no effect on Bill Dingle. While Jim Higgins is recovering from his wounds Bill Dingle continues to trespass on the former's lands.

Suspecting that your uncle might have made a will, I suggested to the public administrator that he look into the matter. Three days ago I received a letter from this official informing me that the Federal Trust Company, of El Paso, had forwarded a will to be filed for probate at Los Algodones. From this will it appears that you are the sole heir and coexecutor with the Federal Trust Company, whose executorship, however, may cease, at your option, but only after the trust company shall have been paid certain loans made your uncle in his lifetime. I have no information as to the amount of these loans, if any.

You will, doubtless, have to employ a local attorney. If desired I shall be happy to recommend one who has served the Higuenes family ably and faithfully for forty years—Don Prudencio Alviso, of Los Algodones.

I regret to state that I have very little confidence in the integrity of your foreman, Bill Dingle, and suggest that you take steps to count the sheep immediately. The count will have to be made by one backed by undoubted legal right to do so. Upon the request of the local attorney for the estate the court will appoint a man to do this for you. I advise very prompt action.

If I can serve you further, please do not hesitate to command

Your obedient servant,

JAIME MIGUEL HIGUENES.

"Well?" Roberta queried as Crooked Bill folded the letter and laid it on the library table.

The old schemer did not answer. Seemingly he was struggling with some secret emotion.

"Market gone against you again, darling?"

"Only three points," Crooked Bill replied sadly.

"Only fifteen thousand dollars additional margin! How many more tilts like that to the ante can you stand, Uncle Bill?"

Crooked Bill Latham's eyes rolled wildly. "I've dug up just one hundred thousand dollars additional to feed into the ravening maw of that stock, and when that's gone I'll be out of the market. However," he added, with a seeming effort casting the horrible worry from him, "we'll lay my business on the table and take up yours. So your Uncle Tom tried to run a blazer on an Irishman, eh? One Jim Higgins. Must be Black Irish, so Tom foolishly mistook him for a Mexican."

He rubbed his ingenious head. "Don't like the idea of that El Paso bank being coexecutor with you, honey. We'd better ascertain how much money the estate owes the bank, pay them off and get rid of them. I imagine it isn't a great deal. No sane bank would loan Tom Antrim very much. Of course this Dingle Bell—"

"Bill Dingle," Roberta corrected. "Señor Higuenes doesn't trust him."

"Señor Higuenes is evidently in the cattle business, if we may judge from his letterhead, so naturally he wouldn't trust any sheepman. I wouldn't be in too great

a hurry to oust Dingle Bell—I mean Bill Dingle, if I were you, Bobby. The qualities that go to make up a good sheep foreman might not appeal to a cattleman. However, I think you should engage Señor Prudencio Alviso as your attorney. Any time you desire you can pay him off and hire some other attorney. What we want now is action. We must have those sheep counted. We'll engage Prudencio by night letter tonight and tell him we're forwarding a thousand for his retainer; we will also suggest that he consult with Higuenes when selecting the man to count the sheep. The court will probably appoint the man nominated by your attorney. Meanwhile we will have to arm you with proper credentials—birth certificate, affidavits and other proof that you are the identical Roberta Antrim mentioned in your uncle's will. Glenn Hackett will attend to that, of course."

"Must I dash down to Los Algodones immediately?" Roberta queried complainingly. "I'll not have to present myself or my proofs until the estate has been probated, will I?"

"Oh, take your time, take your time, honey. Dingle Bell, Prudencio Alviso, and Jaime Miguel Higuenes can handle the situation, I imagine."

CHAPTER VII

THE assistant general manager of the Rancho Valle Verde walked, with a jingling of spurs, into the cool, vine-enclosed veranda where Don Jaime lay at ease in his chaise longue, while a nurse, almost old enough to be his mother, sat in an adjacent chair knitting.

"Well, how's our boss, Mrs. Ganby?" Ken Hobart queried.

"Great!" Don Jaime replied.

"Pardon me, Don Jaime. I was seeking official information. No hearsay evidence for me."

"His wounds have all healed by first intention," the nurse answered. "All small, neat holes and very little tearing of the muscles. I should say he'll be up and around again in a month. Probably lame for a month or two thereafter. At any rate he loses me next week."

"Why don't you remain here, do Don Jaime in the eye for another month's salary and take a nice, quiet vacation?" Hobart suggested.

"I'd like to, but it would be taking money under false pretenses. I like this ranch. It's so peaceful here," Mrs. Ganby said. "Every night I hear a coyote chorus from those buttes yonder. It's thrilling. I dare say, Don

Jaime, you find it rather dull here—such a young man as yourself."

"I do not," Don Jaime replied, almost curtly. "It is the home of my ancestors and I love it."

"Don Jaime resembles the Chinese. He worships his ancestors," Ken Hobart informed her. "But he's never lonely here. Too much to do."

"Why doesn't he get married? Certainly he can afford a wife, Mr. Hobart," the good lady queried. She had an instinct for probing, acquired, doubtless, in a surgery.

"I only look after his cows and his lands, Mrs. Ganby." After the fashion of the men of wide horizons Ken Hobart was averse to discussing personalities. "I've brought the mail, Don Jaime," he added, and tossed a handful of it into his employer's lap.

"Thank you, Ken."

"Don't try to sort it," Hobart urged. "You're not much as a one-handed dealer. The letter you're looking for lies on top. I've slit all the envelops for you."

Don Jaime, with a polite request to be excused, read his mail. Presently he looked up and there was a glint of deviltry in his black eyes.

"Don Prudencio Alviso writes me that he has been engaged by Miss Antrim as attorney for the estate; that Miss Antrim has given the Federal Trust Company a check in payment of the notes it held against the estate and that the bank has resigned as coexecutor. Old Prudy writes to thank me for sending him the busi-

ness. He tells me that with his appointment he received a retainer of a thousand dollars and instructions to secure a good man to count those sheep. Such generosity overwhelms him. As a sheep-counter he suggests you, old leather-face, and I second the nomination, which is tantamount to election where Judge Aurelio Vasquez is concerned."

"How you greasers do stick together," Hobart complained. "It's getting so a white man hasn't got a Chinaman's chance in this part of Texas. A lot of you grade Spaniards calling yourselves Americans have just about got Las Cruces County in the hollow of your hands."

Don Jaime threw a ripe fig at his manager. "At least we're honest, and an honest count of those sheep is most desirable, Ken."

"I could wish the job on some other honest man, Don Jaime."

"Pah! We compliment you, man."

"I'll have to have help."

"You will—a court order."

Don Jaime lifted some very expensive stationery to his aristocratic nose and smelled it hungrily. "Attar of roses," he murmured. "I dare say that's as close as I'll ever get to Miss Roberta Antrim. The lady says she's going to leave everything in her lawyer's hands, with instructions to consult with me, and whatever we two decide to do will meet with her approval. She says she dreads coming down here in summer and she has ac-

cepted so many engagements of a social nature, including a trip to Thousand Islands on a houseboat that she just cannot contemplate abandoning her plans. Gosh, I wish somebody would invite me on a houseboat trip to the Thousand Islands."

"You're amply able to charter a houseboat and invite yourself for a trip," Hobart reminded him.

"*Seguro*. All dressed up and nobody to go with. I'd be lost in so-called high society."

"Who is Roberta Antrim?" the nurse inquired.

"The niece and sole heir of the man Antrim I killed after he'd busted me, Mrs. Ganby."

"And you are her adviser—she's friendly with you?"

"Oh, she doesn't know I'm the bright boy that bumped old Tom off. I wrote her a chap named Jim Higgins had done it."

Ken Hobart chuckled.

"That's his gringo alias, Mrs. Ganby. The first Higuenes to be heard of in Spain was called James Michael Higgins. But the Spaniards gave it a Spanish twist—the 'i' has the sound of 'e' in Spanish and they have a habit of adding 'es' to things. Sometimes they say sheepes or sheeps as the plural of sheep, for instance. So with the passage of time James Michael Higgins, the big Mick, developed into Jaime Miguel Higuenes. When did that happen, Don Jaime?"

"When the first J. M. married a red-headed Spanish woman who insisted on spelling the name as it was pronounced. My ancestor was a good-natured man;

having taken on Spain and the Spaniards, he did not object. Anything for the sake of family peace. So the tribe of Higuenes was born. The family migrated to Mexico early in the nineteenth century, and my great-grandfather married the daughter of an Irishman who owned this rancho. That brought the Celtic strain up a little. My grandfather added to it by marrying a girl who was half Irish, and when he looked at his offspring he was glad he'd done it. He noticed the cross had increased the height, breadth, general appearance, industry, and temper of the Higuenes tribe. We looked much more like Black Irish than Mexicans now, and were probably, a little more than half Celt. But we had Spanish customs and a Spanish outlook on life and Spanish was our mother tongue. Also we had no reason to be other than proud of our Spanish blood, so we never mixed it with Indian. When we moved to Texas my grandfather fought under the Stars and Bars. He sent my father to the Virginia Military Institute and father married a Carrol of Virginia and begot me. And yet this unmannerly general manager of mine calls me a greaser." He tossed another fig at Hobart.

"You have never been married?" the nurse asked.

"Never."

"Aren't you going to be?"

"I fear not. The loneliness here—the coyote chorus on the buttes—all militate against it, Mrs. Ganby."

"The right girl," said Mrs. Ganby, "wouldn't mind it in the least. Go forth and search for her, Don Jaime."

"Impossible," the master of Valle Verde replied lazily. "I have sheep on my hands."

"If I can credit the gossip I heard in Los Algodones, you killed the owner of those sheep trying to get rid of them."

Don Jaime nodded.

"Well, why don't you get rid of them then?"

"The foreman, Bill Dingle, is still living and in charge of those sheep. He's a bad man and a better shot than old Antrim. Besides, if I get those sheep off my range now, where will they go? Why, to somebody else's range, of course, and then there'd be trouble and we might lose Bill Dingle. Then Ken would have to manage those sheep until—"

"Until God knows when," the foreman interrupted. "Can't sell the ewes now. Price is down. And they'll lamb in February. Then we'd have to carry the lambs along until they were fit for market, and meanwhile we'd have to go on stealing grass for the old sheep—"

"And then you'd go crazy, like so many sheep-herders," Don Jaime finished for him.

"So you're putting up with those sheep on your range merely because this Antrim girl is her uncle's heir."

"That's the proposition."

"Why, is she a friend of yours?"

"No, I've never met her. But then no Higuenes has ever quarreled with a lady."

"I fail to see how you are going to escape a quarrel with her, Don Jaime. You killed her uncle."

Don Jaime winced. "Perhaps she will believe that I had no alternative; that, not until after I had killed him, did I know he was her uncle. In fact, I didn't know I had killed anybody until Ken rode down the draw and informed me of my luck."

"Well, the fact that you are being so excessively nice to her since may mitigate the affair, although one can never predict the attitude a woman will take. A woman is usually guided by her heart, not her head, Don Jaime."

Don Jaime appraised the old nurse with kindly interest. "I take it, Mrs. Ganby, that you are old enough to be guided by your head. You told me you are a widow. Have you any children?"

"One—a boy of fifteen. He has been quite crippled since his twelfth birthday. Infantile paralysis."

Don Jaime considered this. "Suppose you had a comfortable home where you could be with your boy always —no necessity to hustle hither and yon nursing people? I should have a hostess here. For some time I have felt that Flavio's wife is too—well, elemental, for the job. This hacienda should know a gentlewoman's management—at nurse's wages. There are always some puppies around here, and the boy could play with them. He could raise rabbits and pigeons, I dare say, and if he can sit a horse I'll stake him to a pretty little Sonora pony and a Mexican youth to look after him. I suppose you could carry on with his schooling—you know, it does get lonesome here sometimes."

"Oh, Don Jaime! You mean it!"

He nodded. "I'd like to be able to invite nice people to visit me, Mrs. Ganby. This old *casa* is very comfortable and well furnished. I should like to have my friends from the surrounding country come to dinner oftener, but I'm never satisfied with the appearance of my board, the menu or the service. I have no time to train maids and housekeepers—and if I did I wouldn't know how."

"Yes, a man is very helpless. I should be glad to come, Don Jaime."

"You are very kind. Ken, you run up to El Paso and get the boy. Mrs. Ganby will arrange that detail with you. Now clear out and let me sleep. My Mexican blood is getting on the job."

Mrs. Ganby, with tears of happiness in her middle-aged eyes, followed the assistant general manager into the ranch office.

"How long have you known Don Jaime?" she asked Hobart.

"A long time. Went to the state university with him. My father and I had a cow outfit down in the Big Bend country but we went broke during the post-war deflation period. Don Jaime and I enlisted for the Great War—and spent two years guarding the Border. At that we dodged more lead than some of those who went to France. After the bank closed in on the Hobarts I joined the rangers; now I've left them to work for Don Jaime."

"He is congenitally magnificent."

Ken Hobart laughed. "Always remembers he's *muy caballero,* Mrs. Ganby. He does things with a flourish. It isn't pose. His people have always done it. Strangers come to Valle Verde, billet themselves and their horses on him for the night and eat at his board. When they depart next morning Don Jaime opens the gate for them himself. A serio-comic chap, a great reader and keen student of human nature. Just as one has begun to think he's all Spanish he does something that's all Irish. He sings very well and there he proves his Celtic blood. His father died when he was twenty. He's twenty-eight now. His mother died giving him birth, so you see he's man-raised."

"Why do you suppose he engaged me, Mr. Hobart? Do you think he suspected he was doing a very wonderful thing for my boy and me?"

"Yes, I think so. Jimmy can see through a ladder. But he engaged you, principally, I think, because he wants the Casa Higuenes to be running in civilized fashion in case his luck holds and he should have the honor of entertaining Miss Roberta Antrim and her duenna."

"She'll not have a duenna."

"Oh, yes, she will. You'll supply that lack. Don Jaime is very tactful and formal."

Mrs. Ganby laughed. Then a cloud passed over her aging face. "When I am no longer needed I suppose he will dispense with my services. However, I'm grate-

ful. Even a few months here will be so wonderful for my son."

Ken Hobart menaced her with a tobacco-stained index finger. "That's where Don Jaime will prove that part of him still belongs in the sixteenth century. Once you get on the Higuenes payroll you can't get off unless you run away. He has four old American cowboys whose days of usefulness in the saddle are almost over. They go into Los Algodones and get drunk and when they're drunk they're quarrelsome. So frequently they get arrested. Don Prudencio Alviso immediately bails them out. Those are his orders from Don Jaime. You see, these four old rascals were inherited by Don Jaime from his father; they dangled him on their wicked knees in babyhood. Of course he disciplines them. Withholds their wages for three months, or banishes them to some lonely outpost cabin on the range. But they can't be discharged because Don Jaime knows that would break their hearts. This is their home.

"When a Mexican employee misbehaves he is formally tried. Sometimes he is put in the ranch lock-up and sometimes Don Jaime flogs him. It depends on the crime. Whatever Don Jaime does is right with his *peones* provided he does exactly what his father used to do, and all the fathers before him. They know Don Jaime is just. At five minutes' notice Don Jaime can turn out a hundred and fifty men, well-mounted, well-armed and ready to take the field on any adventure which Don Jaime will lead. He organized them and

drilled them as a mobile force after Pancho Villa raided Columbus, New Mexico, in 1916. So the Higuenes outfit is bad medicine for the bands of bandit cattle-raiders who sometimes come across the Rio Grande.

"Under such circumstances Don Jaime doesn't remember the neutrality of the United States of America. He rides after his cows and gets them back. The ranger force and the customs officials along the Border are in sympathy with him of course, so they never see too much of what goes south and always get word to Don Jaime when anything is known to have come north. The Higuenes range runs to the river, you know."

"But surely the Mexican authorities must object."

"Why should they? Don Jaime cleans up for the rurales—and a rurale is seldom where he's wanted. In fact I've known Don Jaime to join forces with them. He's a good spender—always *muy caballero*—and he's one of their people. He can get away with murder."

"Why is he so interested in the niece of this vicious old man he had to kill?"

"Because Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes is a romantic Mick, that's why. He saw a full-page rotogravure picture of her in the Suburban Gentleman, and picked her for the mother of his children."

"Oh, dear, he's quite hopeless! She may photograph beautifully even with red hair, freckles and green eyes, but she may also be mean and selfish and irritating; she may be without manners."

"In that event," said Ken Hobart, "she just won't

be the mother of his children. Don Jaime doesn't want the Higuenes tribe to vanish from the earth, but he would prefer to have them vanish rather than breed something ignoble. Everything he has on this ranch is well bred, except his Indians and Mexicans—and they are mannerly."

"Including his man Friday, Ken Hobart."

"I was referring," Mr. Hobart replied seriously, "to his live stock. Where will I find this boy of yours?" he demanded, to change the conversation. "I'm starting for El Paso now. Don Jaime is a lazy devil himself, but he likes his orders obeyed instantly."

Mrs. Ganby wrote a note to the people with whom she boarded her crippled son and gave it to Hobart together with the address. When he repaired to his quarters to array himself for the journey Mrs. Ganby returned to her patient.

"What a charming man your Mr. Hobart is, Don Jaime!" she began.

"He'll do in a pinch"—laconically.

"He is very devoted to your interests."

Don Jaime did not answer. His glance was out through the arched gateway, from which the road ran straight down the valley. A mile away a dust-cloud was gathering on that road.

"Somebody is coming in a hurry," he murmured. "When they hurry it's always bad news."

A solitary horseman galloped up to the gate, threw himself off and hurried up the steps.

"Well, my friend?" Don Jaime queried in Spanish. "What evil message do you bring and from whom?"

"Thirty riders crossed the Rio Grande at daylight, señor. They are rounding up several hundred of the señor's cattle. It is a raid."

"My thanks are due you, my friend. They will not get far. Who sent you here?"

"The American customs agent at Los Algodones, Don Jaime. He bids you send your riders to head them off before they recross the river with your cattle."

"Return and tell him I have but forty men available. The others are attending a baile at the Rancho Verdugo. Forty men will be sufficient, I think. Return to the customs agent with my gratitude for his timely warning and tell him my men will start in ten minutes, perhaps less."

The man touched his hat, flung himself on his horse and galloped away. Don Jaime lighted a cigar and smoked contentedly, while Mrs. Ganby watched him with alert curiosity.

Presently Ken Hobart, arrayed in his "town" clothes, came to announce his impending departure.

"Delay it until tomorrow, Ken," his employer ordered casually. "I have a job for you." And he recounted the tale brought by his recent visitor. "Take forty men and ride for the river. If this man's tale is the truth you will have work there. I think, however, he lies. Have Caraveo arm the other men available and instruct him to have them remain in the barns with

their horses until I send him word that he is not going to be needed."

"A plant, eh?"

"I've been expecting reprisal, Ken. I told this messenger I had but forty men available but would send them immediately. Go with them. Then we shall see that which we shall see. I smell sheep."

Hobart departed to fulfil his orders, and Don Jaime stretched himself for his siesta, nor did the clatter of hoofs and the jingle of bits and spurs as his retainers rode south past the hacienda disturb him.

Suddenly he opened his eyes and turned to Mrs. Ganby. "Please tell Flavio to assist me to enter my house," he said. "There is more dust to the south. We shall have visitors—about ten, I think."

When the Indian came Don Jaime spoke to him in Spanish. The old *peon* picked Don Jaime up in his strong arms, carried him inside and laid him on a sofa. Then he departed casually.

"You will oblige me by locking and bolting that door, Mrs. Ganby," Don Jaime requested gently.

He stretched himself, wriggling for comfort, and blew a succession of smoke rings toward the ceiling. Presently came the sound of hurrying feet on the veranda, and through the iron-barred tiny window that gave on the veranda Mrs. Ganby saw men standing about. There came a smart rap on the door.

"Who's there?" Don Jaime challenged in a ringing voice. *"Quién es?"*

"Open the door," a rough voice commanded. "We want you and we're going to have you."

"Ah, so it is my friend Bill Dingle. I have been expecting you, William, ever since you so thoughtfully sent one of your men with a false cry of raiders from below the Border. I sent forty men. Your lookout in the hills saw them ride out, and when they had passed you decided to come to my hacienda, deserted save for the women and children, and kill me in some unpleasant manner. Is it not so?"

There was no answer to this and Don Jaime's mocking laugh floated through the window. "Now, Dingle, my poor fellow, consider the situation. A hundred armed men surround this poor house of mine. Go you, Friend Dingle, to the patio entrance and look."

A murmuring rose among the recent arrivals and one of them ran to the entrance of the patio. A volley of good old Anglo-Saxon curses echoed through the old-fashioned garden, then the man came running back to join his fellows.

"Is seeing believing, Señor Dingle?" Don Jaime called pleasantly.

"You win, Higuenes."

"One by one you will go to the entrance and give up your arms to my riding boss. It would be madness to resist. You shall not be killed and presently you shall all return to your sheeps—I mean sheep. Forward! March!"

A moment's hesitation, more low-voiced colloquy,

a curse or two, and the retreat to the entrance commenced. A few minutes later Enrico Caraveo, a little pockmarked Mexican, thrust a smiling, sardonic face up to the grilled window.

"I have the honor to inform Don Jaime that his visitors await his pleasure."

"Confine them in the barn under guard. Feed them."

"Sí, señor," murmured the riding boss, and departed chuckling.

Mrs. Ganby, white-faced, speechless with terror, watched Don Jaime blowing smoke rings. Presently he looked across at her, his eyes filled with musing, his white teeth showing in a gentle little smile.

"It's a great world, isn't it, Mrs. Ganby?" he murmured. "Please call Flavio. I would return to the veranda." He sighed. "I am the first Higuenes to hide himself from his foe," he deplored, "but when one is crippled one must employ discretion. Yes, I, Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes, have hidden from sheep-herders. *Ay de mí!*"

The nurse stood by his chaise longue after Flavio had deposited him once more therein.

"Don Jaime Higuenes," she demanded, "after that exhibition of ingratitude on the part of those sheepmen, are you still going to permit them to trespass on your range?"

Don Jaime raised a deprecating hand. "An Higuenes," he assured her, "does not quarrel with a woman."

Mrs. Ganby's eyes blazed. "Now, at least," she de-

clared, "I know why Cervantes wrote Don Quixote. Only a Spaniard could have conceived such a character and only a Spaniard could—could—could—"

"Señora," Don Jaime protested, "my name is Jimmy Higgins."

CHAPTER VIII

ROBERTA ANTRIM'S limousine rolled up the graveled driveway to the wide portals of Hillcrest, and Harms, the butler, came down the steps and opened the door.

"Mr. Latham came home an hour ago, miss," he confided. "Something must have happened in the city today, miss. He's worried—walking up and down the drawing-room and talking to himself. I'm a bit worried about the master, miss."

"Thank you, Harms. You're very kind."

A foreboding of disaster brought Roberta flying into the living-room. Crooked Bill sat huddled in a reading chair, his face in his hands, his attitude reminiscent of profound despair.

"Uncle Bill! What's happened?"

Crooked Bill's old hands merely clasped his features tighter. He wagged his head and moaned.

"Are you in pain, Uncle Bill?"

"The market only jumped fifteen points. I'm through. My brokers sold me out this afternoon. Oh, Bobby, Bobby, what a massacre! I stayed as long as I dared, but when the last jump came I realized that only a crazy man would continue in this crazy market.

I declined to invest another dollar—for the reason that I didn't have it. I told my brokers I'd gone the limit and to sell me out. My five thousand dumped on the market like that broke the stock two points, but that was to be expected. I'm all washed up."

"Must we leave Hillcrest?" Roberta queried in a strangled voice.

"We must," Crooked Bill replied heroically. "I have enough to pay off the servants and maintain us in respectability at some modest hotel until we can look around and see what the future holds for us, but after that—"

"After that I'll take care of you, dear Uncle Bill." Roberta's voice was very tender, the touch of her lovely cheek to Crooked Bill's wrinkled jowls was very soothing to that wretched wreck of a financier. "Sheep are up and so is wool, Uncle Bill. Don Prudencio Alviso writes me that Uncle Tom's sheep are worth at least two hundred thousand as they stand, and he has over a hundred thousand pounds of wool in transit to a wool house in Boston. And good wool is quoted in today's paper at thirty cents a pound. Uncle Tom has a ranch of sorts also. Don Prudencio doesn't think much of it and says it is not of ready sale, but we can live there and carry on in the sheep business—"

"You have no conception of what you are proposing to me," Crooked Bill groaned. "Sheep are terrible."

"Well, you've always taken care of me, haven't you, darling? What a poor sport I'd be to desert you when

you're down and out. No, no, dear. We'll battle along together to the last sheep."

Uncle Bill Latham sighed and gazed drearily out the window. "If you'd only fixed it up to marry Glenn Hackett—"

"If we didn't have these sheep and the wool I'd marry him and risk learning to love him, just to keep you from worrying about me," Roberta assured him heroically. "But of course, thanks to that odious Jim Higgins, I find myself in rather an independent position. We will sell off all the sheep and wool and live comfortably and economically on the income from that until—"

"Hackett is coming for dinner," he interrupted. "Be nice to him. He's my attorney, of course, and I'll have to tell him what's happened to me. If he elects to forget that idiotic tiff you and he had recently, for heaven's sake hold out the olive branch. You'll never have a chance at a better man, Bobby."

"Perhaps he will not be interested in me, now that I am not your heiress, as I dare say he believed me to be once."

"Well, give him a chance to play his hand," Crooked Bill protested. "Promise me, Bobby, that if he renews his suit you'll accord him kindly and respectful consideration."

In her great distress at the catastrophe which had overtaken her guardian Roberta was in a mood to promise anything—and did. Crooked Bill appeared to

rally immediately and mixed himself a noggin of his favorite beverage.

Roberta was dressing when she heard Glenn Hackett's car rolling up the driveway. She looked out her window and called, "Hello, old stick-in-the-mud! How are you?"

He favored her with a not very enthusiastic wave of his hand before his car disappeared under the porte-cochère.

"Still holding his little grudge," Roberta thought. "Well, I don't blame him. Nevertheless I loathe sulky men."

Crooked Bill received his guest at the door and at once conducted him to the library, where the old schemer's favorite nepenthe awaited.

"I've got to talk fast, my boy," he began, "before Roberta comes down. In the first place you must brace yourself for a not very cheerful dinner. I'm supposed to have gone bust in the market—Hillcrest has been gobbled up by my bankers to meet my notes, I'm down to a couple of thousand dollars, and bootleggers are even now supposed to be bidding on my pre-war stock. In a word, hell pops generally."

Glenn Hackett stared at the old gentleman owlishly. He was a man who seldom asked questions before he had all of the facts in hand. Crooked Bill continued:

"I hope I do not have to assure you, Glenn, that in so far as Bobby is concerned I'm for you all the way."

"Thank you very much," Hackett replied. "I have suspected as much for quite a while."

"That girl is too dog-gone high and mighty to suit me," Crooked Bill continued, sipping his drink with meditative pleasure, "so I've cooked up a scheme to bring her fluttering to the ground. Roberta's the light of my eye and the apple of my heart, but nevertheless, as a reasoning human being, I've got to admit she has her drawbacks. She's got to be yanked down out of the clouds of romance to earthly practicalities, and in my feeble way I'm attempting to do it. All of her life I've been busy spoiling Roberta by granting every wish she expressed and a heap she never thought of expressing. That's bad business."

"It's a business I fear I'd love to engage in," Glenn Hackett replied with one of his rare, humorous grins.

"Well, I'm not so sure Roberta wouldn't be delighted to be your partner—after she's brought you to the proper point of subjugation. The trouble with you, son, is that you're not sufficiently romantic to appeal to Roberta. You're too old for your years. Do you ever make her a pretty speech? flatter her a little? remark on her dresses, the way she does her hair—things like that? My boy, women eat that sort of thing with a large spoon."

"I fear I'm sadly deficient in that method of approach."

"I know. You have the fool habit of looking all the things you ought to say. Now, then, here's my plan."

He recited in marvelous detail his conversation with Roberta of a few days before, regarding his operations in Wall Street. "Of course," he added, "I'll skate all the way around the truth, but I won't actually lie. Not to Roberta, at any rate. I just pulled a mournful mien, and Roberta jumped to the conclusion that I had sold five thousand General Motors short and that with every jump of the ticker I was losing a fortune. You see, I merely outlined to her what would happen to any chap who bought short in this market. Thus I craftily paved the way for a mythical collapse.

"Today I came staggering in, play-acting all over the place, and moaned aloud that I was out of the market, that General Motors had jumped fifteen points and that my brokers had sold me out because I didn't dare stay with the game any longer. Well, as a matter of fact I am out of the market. My brokers did sell me out—but on the right side of the ledger, and as a result I've cleaned up about ten millions. I've arranged with a trusted friend to pretend he's bought Hillcrest from the bank to which I had given a deed. Well, I did give the bank a deed, as security for more money to play this crazy market, but I could afford to. I was miles ahead of the hounds—playing on margin. I've leased this place for July, August, and September—and Roberta is so sorry for me she's going to sell out her Uncle Tom's sheep and wool and take care of me the remainder of my days."

"Very nice of Roberta, I should say, Mr. Latham.

But then Roberta was always a good sport. Witness the sporty manner in which she took that beating I was insane enough to inflict on her in a moment of pique. I wish my tongue had cleaved to the roof of my mouth."

"Don't you wish anything of the sort. Women—Roberta's type of woman—love rough stuff from their men."

"I'm not her man."

"You follow my lead and you will be. You've given her one licking and I'm giving her another. Right now she's figuring ways and means of avoiding all her old friends. She'll never place herself in the position of being pitied by her set, of being patronized, of being the recipient of favors she can't repay. She knows her set—knows that money is king, and that those who cannot hold their place in the race must fall behind and be forgotten. My boy, a change of fortune is going to make that girl do some solid, constructive thinking."

"Still I do not quite follow you."

"I'm not surprised. Where Roberta is concerned you do not think very clearly. Now, listen to me, my boy. Roberta's going down to Texas to look after her interests. She hasn't said so, but I know the thought will occur to her between now and tomorrow morning. She didn't want to go if she could avoid it, but now she's beginning to think it is her duty to go. She must be on the job to protect every dollar coming to her from Tom Antrim's estate. She's the Little Mother now.

Got to take care of poor old Uncle Bill Latham, or else poor old Uncle Bill will never raise his head again."

"A very commendable spirit. That makes me love Roberta all the more. But still I do not follow you."

"You idiot boy! I'm going to give you a chance to be a hero, to put Roberta under obligation to you. Tonight, at dinner, this sad story I've just told you is going to come out. You're going to suspect something and start probing me—and when you discover all is over you're going to suggest saving me."

"How?"

Crooked Bill rubbed his hands together and smiled a coyote smile. "You're going to tell me that this rise in General Motors is, undoubtedly, one of the greatest bull movements ever noted in the market, but that from sources of information you cannot, in honor, divulge, you happen to know that the bears aren't licked, that they have the bulls in a tight corner and that General Motors is due to crash. I want you to use the word crash. It's a good word. Novelists and newspapermen always use it. It's—it's—significant. Then you rawhide me for not coming to you with my troubles when the going got slippery. You tell me I was a tarnation old fool for not doing so; that if I could only have held on a little bit longer the tide would have turned and that you would have been delighted to have loaned me a million to carry me over. *Sabe* that?"

"Yes, sir. Then what?"

"Why, I'll be overcome with emotion and say:

'Glenn, you ought to know I'd be the last man in the world to suggest a loan from you, of all men—under the circumstances.' And I'll give Bobby a look that will be—well, significant. She'll be grateful to me for not having placed her in position of having to be grateful to you for helping me. But at the same time she'll be grateful to you for suggesting it. Well, I'll tell you it's too late now, that the fat's in the fire, and you jump up and yell that it isn't, that you will see the bank and get them to refrain from recording the deed I gave them to Hillcrest; that you'll get them to accept your indorsement of my notes and continue to hold the deed as additional security for the loans."

"So far, I follow you. What next, Mr. Latham?"

"You jump up and say you must have time to think. Prance up and down the dining-room, thinking hard. Act like a movie actor. Show Roberta, who will be watching you fascinated, that in an emergency nobody need look beyond you. Prove to her you are a strong man—a quick-thinking, bold, adventurous, brave fellow, but be careful to ignore her completely. Make it plain that what you are going to do is because of your ancient friendship for me. Disclaim any risk. Then out with your plan to save the old homestead and the family fortune."

"The plan," Glenn Hackett demanded, "the plan."

Crooked Bill's old eyes fairly popped with delight at the part he was playing. "When I first jumped into the market on General Motors, Glenn, I sold twenty-

five hundred short. Then the stock started up grade, so I sold out, took my loss and—immediately bought double the amount I had sold, and spread it as thin as I could on margin."

"Excellent strategy."

"Well, then, your plan will be to suggest that now, with the stock at its peak price, the obvious thing for me to do is to sell five thousand shares or even ten thousand. You'll put up the margin for me. Assure me there is no risk, that the stock will drop a hundred points within sixty days. You can cite any number of stocks that have dropped that much—some of them in a week. Here is a list to refresh your memory. Remind me that for a while during the post-war panic Liberty bonds sold away below par. Advise me to make the gamble and assure me I will not be called upon for any more margin, that the price of General Motors has now reached a point that is unhealthy, wildly speculative, not backed up by assets. Pretty soon it will begin to slide, and when it has slid far enough all I have to do is sell out my line, clean up and be back where I started, less the sums I owe you. Point out that by this method of procedure I can, at least, get back a million dollars, but insist that when I do you must have my solemn word of honor never, never, never to do any more stock gambling."

"How will you receive this philanthropic offer, Mr. Latham?"

"I shall be overcome again at this exhibition of your

friendship and generosity, but I shall refuse to borrow money from you on my worthless note—and I'll give Roberta another meaning look. Then, do you know what she'll do?"

"No."

"She'll get you off in a corner, privately, and make you figure out for her just how much money will be required to margin five thousand shares. Then she'll ask you, secretly, to make the deal in her name, and accept an assignment of her interest in Tom Antrim's estate at something less than it would bring at a sacrifice sale, as security for the money you will put up for margin. She will insist on this and reluctantly you let her have her way."

"We will consider that settled. Continue, please."

"You two will now have a delightful secret together. You will have a community interest—my abject, hopeless self. You will be in daily communication regarding the market. That will be your sole interest, your sole topic of conversation. While this mythical deal is on not a word of love to Roberta. There must be no sentiment in this business, or you'll spoil everything.

"Well, in the fulness of time when the market breaks —as you and I know blamed well it will—you make the mythical clean-up, hand me back the deed to Hillcrest and a fake check for my winnings—or rather, let Roberta do it, so she'll feel that the credit for the coup is all hers—remind me of my word of honor to quit stock gambling, shake hands all around, bid Roberta a

somewhat suppressed good-by and announce you are off for a trip around the world, to be gone a year. And at that moment, old son, if you play your cards with the skill and judgment which a lawyer of your proved ability should, Roberta will go with you or I'm fit for an insane asylum."

"I'm not so certain your plan will work out as perfectly as you appear to think, Mr. Latham," Hackett replied doubtfully.

"Of course it will. Why not? Roberta will be serious now. No more flirting, no more attempting to work her wiles on you to see you squirm and satiate her with a sense of her power over you. She'll begin to study you then, to appreciate the fact that you have qualities she must respect; she'll feel grateful to you, but owing to the fact that she secured your loan the obligation will be more mine than hers. No love. Business. Then love will bob up of its own accord."

Glenn Hackett looked genuinely distressed. Crooked Bill rambled on: "I want Roberta to go to Texas to look after that estate. She has a jolt coming to her when she gets there, and I'm the little boy that knows it. Twenty-five years ago I was in the cattle business myself, in Las Cruces County, Texas. I owned the Rancho Verdugo and sold out to a chap named Bill Hobart. I know this Higuenes family. I don't know Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes, but I did know his father, and a grand piece of work he was. Spanish with a broad streak of Irish or Irish with a broad streak of

Spanish, I forget which. Not a drop of Indian blood in the family. I remember the old man had an infant son named Jaime, so this chap who killed Tom Antrim must be that boy."

"Higuenes says a man named Jim Higgins killed Antrim. Roberta told me over the telephone."

"Jaime is Spanish for James, readily corrupted to Jimmy, and Higuenes is Spanish for Higgins. Don Jaime went over to Antrim's camp to order him and his sheep off the Higuenes range. Antrim, the skunk, figured on murdering the boy without risk to himself. Fortunately a third man was present at that conference just before the killing—a ranger named Kenneth Hobart—son of old Bill Hobart to whom I sold the Rancho Verdugo. Higuenes borrowed the ranger's rifle unknown to Antrim—and although Antrim shot Higuenes three times, eventually Higuenes got out of range. Then he stalked Antrim and killed him. I have had a report on the matter by telegraph, collect, from the coroner at Los Algodones."

"Very interesting, Mr. Latham."

"Best news I've had in fifty years, Glenn. But what challenges my interest is this. Antrim is dead, Higuenes lives and is not seriously injured, yet Antrim's sheep, with the tacit consent of Higuenes, continue to trespass. Meanwhile Higuenes is doing all he can to protect Roberta, whom he has never met—and all at considerable loss and inconvenience to himself, because those sheep are ruining his range. Sheep foul

a range up, and cattle will not graze where a sheep has grazed. Also, a sheep destroys the range. Eats the grass down to the roots and then some. Now, why is Higuenes doing this?"

"Search me, sir."

"He has some ulterior motive, and Roberta will discover it, of course. Well, I want Roberta to go down there all het up with the mental picture she has painted of this romantic Higuenes. She'll find a brand of man she never met before. All I hope is that he makes love to her with Latin impetuosity, because if he does he'll be put in his place. Roberta will not be rushed by any man. All the men she'll meet there will be so different she'll be disillusioned. She'll begin to appreciate a man who bathes and shaves daily, who dresses in good taste, who knows something besides cattle and sheep and local politics, who lives in a regular house and moves in cultured society. She'll see the other side of the picture—and it will be good for her immortal soul."

"There may be a great deal in what you say, Mr. Latham, and perhaps your cute financial plans will work out exactly as you expect, but I'm here to tell you they will not, and for one very potent reason. I'm not so blamed certain that I want Roberta."

Crooked Bill set down his glass and stared at the young man in undisguised horror and amazement.

"I'm afraid of her," Hackett resumed in his slow, methodical way. "She's too blamed modern and I'm too old-fashioned. I'll not change and she can't. I fear

we would be mismated and I'll not risk a brief happiness. I can stand to lose Roberta now, but I wouldn't care to have to stand to lose her after I'd won her; it'd break my heart to discover at some future time that she wasn't happy with me."

"Mares' nests," Crooked Bill protested. "I tell you I know women. They may hoot for years at a masterful man, but they'll end up by marrying him and adoring him until death do them part. However, why cross the bridge until you come to it? Go through with my little plan and then stand by to see how the cat jumps. Remember, we're out to humble this proud damsel, to make her see life without looking at it through amber glasses. She has some things to learn and some to unlearn. Nothing like worry and adversity to clear a proud head, I'm telling you."

"Well, it cannot hurt to try the thing out, Mr. Latham. If there's any back-fire later, you'll be the one to get scorched for deceiving folks who trust you."

"Spoken like a man," said Crooked Bill, and poured Hackett another drink. "Well, here's to poverty, sin and death. Drink hearty!"

CHAPTER IX

HALF an hour after Don Jaime's coup had resulted in the capture of Bill Dingle and his men, another dust-cloud to the south attracted Don Jaime's attention. He watched it without interest.

"Ken Hobart and his men returning," he explained to Mrs. Ganby presently. "Ken has a head and can be depended upon to use it."

His cheerful grin welcomed Hobart as he entered, leaving his men to ride around to the barns and corral. "I didn't bother sending a messenger with the news that it was a false alarm, Ken," he informed the latter. "I figured you'd have one man drop out of your party to watch the road to Valle Verde, while you rode on, taking your leisure."

"I did exactly that," Hobart replied. "When he galloped after us and reported seven mounted men had come out of a cañon to the east and taken the road to Valle Verde at a fast trot, I concluded your suspicions were well-grounded and that I might risk returning. So Dingle arrived with blood in his eye, eh, Don Jaime?"

Don Jaime nodded. "And masked, too. I have an idea they planned to hang me from one of the trellis

beams in my own grape arbor. . . . Well, Caraveo has them over at the barn under guard."

"What do you intend to do with them?"

"It occurred to me it would be a fine idea to enforce my hospitality on Dingle and his men until after we've counted those sheep. That makes the job a lot easier, don't you think? Easier, too, to shift those sheep south of the Arroyo San Dieguito again and keep them there."

Hobart nodded approval. "The best way to win a fight is to avoid it," he agreed. "Well, Caraveo can count the sheep now, while I go up to El Paso for that crippled boy."

He departed for his quarters again, changed into more urban clothing and was driven to town in the ranch car. Three days later he returned with Mrs. Ganby's son, an ethereal little boy semi-paralyzed on his left side; while he could walk, it was with a loose, uncontrolled swing of leg and arm, accompanied by a slight limp. When he had been greeted by his mother he was brought to Don Jaime to be presented. Shyly he sidled up to the lord of the rancho and laid a thin little hand in Don Jaime's, so firm and hard and brown.

"I'm awfully glad you consented to come down here and keep me company, Robbie," the young man greeted him. He lifted the frail little body to his lap. "What can you do to keep a fellow amused?" he demanded.

Robbie was surprised. He had anticipated being amused, not being called upon to amuse another crip-

ple. So he pondered Don Jaime's question and replied, presently, that he could play the harmonica.

"You'll be popular, Robbie, but in order to make a real hit you must learn to play a lot of airs you've never heard before. Did you bring your harmonica?"

"Yes, sir. Ken bought me a grand one in El Paso."

"Think you two can get along without fighting?"

Robbie laughed at the bare idea of conflict with his new-found friend. "Oh, Ken and I get along fine together. Coming out in the car he let me wear his pistol. He said we might meet some tough customers and it was best to be ready. He let me shoot his pistol, too." He stared hard at Don Jaime. "What's your name, mister?"

"My name is Jimmy."

"You got any boys?"

"No. That's why I sent Ken up after you. I've been lonesome a lot, here lately, so when your mother told me she had a boy, why, I thought I'd borrow you. You have no objection, I hope?"

"Not the slightest, Jimmy."

"Did Ken tell you about the pony we have here for you?"

Robbie's wistful eyes glistened. "I can ride a pony. I know I can."

"When I get well we'll go riding together. I think now, Robbie, your mother wants to visit with you, so you'd better run along. After dinner we'll have another visit and really get acquainted."

Mrs. Ganby's glance rested on Don Jaime with an expression almost as maternal as that to which her crippled son was accustomed. "Strange man," she thought. "One moment he's as soft and beguiling as a kitten and the next he's as fierce and bristling as a tiger. Well, I suppose he knows men—at least the sort of men he has to deal with. Decidedly Don Jaime will not inherit the earth. He isn't meek enough!"

Having changed from his store clothes to the accustomed freedom of chambray shirt and light, cool khaki "slacks," Ken Hobart dropped into the long chair beside his employer.

"Yes, we're counting the sheep," Don Jaime said. He had the gift, decidedly Celtic, of telepathy. Had it to a marked degree, in fact.

"Any trouble?"

"None. Bill Dingle's foreman made a bluff at starting some, but Caraveo paid no attention to him. He was troubled in his soul at the lack of news concerning Bill Dingle and the six herders; to him no news was bad news, so I instructed Caraveo to ignore him and tell him nothing—if necessary, to treat him rough. And I sent enough men to enforce my desires. First they moved the sheep south of the San Dieguito, where we had another gang building a corral, with a chute. We're washing the brutes in a big pot-hole in the San Dieguito, shearing them, running them through the chute one at a time, branding them, examining their tails and feet, segregating the lame, the halt and the

blind, cutting out the lambs and the old ewes with bad mouths, and plan to haul them up here in motor trucks, after giving the foreman a receipt for them. The young and husky sheep we will turn back on the range."

Ken Hobart chuckled. "Why, you're quite a sheep man, aren't you?"

"Well, somebody had to do it for the girl. I'll place a guard on the wool, and as soon as you can buy some wool sacks I want you to sack that wool and haul it up to the ranch for safe-keeping."

"You'll be put to quite a bit of expense, Don Jaime."

"I should say so. I have forty shearers, working day and night. Big wool crop, Caraveo tells me. In fact, those sheep should have been sheared six weeks ago, but Tom Antrim wasn't in a hurry. He had the sheep running on a grass range, so they weren't losing any wool by having it torn off in the brush and brambles."

"Have you authority to take possession in this high-handed manner?"

"*Seguro!* I always make my own authority. Don Prudencio Alviso is Miss Antrim's local representative, and whatever I do will be jake with Prudencio, who always desires to earn his fee with as little labor and worry as possible."

"What are you going to do with the wool?"

"Hold it here, safely, until the market goes up, or I receive orders to sell it immediately."

"And the lambs and the old ewes?"

"Those lambs can't fatten on scant feed. They can

just about get by. And the old ewes with broken teeth or no teeth at all were starving to death. Their carcasses were dotting the range. So I thought I'd put them on our tender, succulent alfalfa. The lambs can get along without their mothers now, and a month or six weeks on alfalfa and ground barley will fit them for market. They ought to bring ten dollars each."

"Who's going to pay for all this? The Antrim estate?"

"If it can afford to. If it can't—" Don Jaime shrugged the indifferent shrug of one who has not been reared to do things on the half-shell, as it were. "Don Prudencio was out to see me yesterday. He has had a letter from Miss Antrim. It appears that her uncle, whose ward she is, is very seriously threatened with the loss of his fortune. If I may judge by the indifference she exhibited toward this sheep fortune she has fallen heir to, when the news of the windfall was first broken to her, the fortune about to be lost by her uncle must be considerable. At any rate she's anxious about the sheep now and has instructed Don Prudencio to guard them and preserve them. Of course the old man was as helpless as a child and came to me for advice. I told him to wire her that the sheep were safe with me and to disabuse his placid mind of all worry concerning them."

"But they aren't safe!" Ken Hobart protested. "What's to prevent Bill Dingle from driving to market the sheep still on the range?"

"You forget that Bill Dingle is my guest. Caraveo told the foreman to guard the sheep well and to engage other herders; that Bill Dingle would return anon, like Mary's lamb, dragging his tail behind him. The foreman wanted to know who was going to meet the payroll, and Caraveo told him I would."

"Isn't Enrico taking a lot for granted, Don Jaime?"

"Oh, Enrico knows me pretty well. Better go to Los Algodones tomorrow, Ken, draw about a thousand dollars from the bank and pay off those sheepmen. They'll stick on the job and take good care of those range sheep, when they know they're being watched. Better hire half a dozen new herders for that foreman, too, and relieve our men who are now helping him."

"And do you intend keeping Bill Dingle and his men in your private hoosegow indefinitely?"

"Oh, no, not indefinitely, Ken. I've only sentenced them to thirty days for trespass and assault with intent to do great bodily harm. I like to be judge and jury in all matters that affect my own welfare, and if I turned Bill Dingle and his dinglets over to the law there would be the usual fuss and feathers and delay."

"But Dingle claims that part of his remuneration as manager for Tom Antrim was an interest in the lamb crop. He'll charge you with stealing his lambs and sue you for huge damages."

"But I'll give his foreman a receipt for all the sheep and wool I possess myself of. I'll even give Dingle a duplicate receipt. Sign it myself, too."

"Don Jaime, you're hopelessly medieval. You and all of the Higuenes tribe have been a law unto yourselves so long you don't know anything about the law of the land. Now, I've been an officer of the law and naturally an officer of the law has to be familiar with the law. I'm perfectly familiar with the law covering kidnaping—and if Dingle charges you with kidnaping and swears that you held him a prisoner thirty days in an effort to make him sign over his interest in those lambs, it's going to cost you a lot of money to defend yourself. And if you're convicted the punishment is imprisonment for life."

"An Higuenes cannot be convicted in Las Cruces County, my friend. There would be an overwhelming preponderance of Latin blood in the jury, and a Latin doesn't care two hoots in a hollow for the law. All he wants is justice and he doesn't want any justice other than the brand that appeals to him. King John of Runnymede and Don Quixote could never agree on anything."

Ken Hobart threw back his head and laughed. "I advise you to turn Bill Dingle and his dinglets loose. You are holding them illegally."

But Don Jaime shook his raven head. "The best I'll do for Dingle is to let him have a dozen packs of playing cards and a couple of guitars for his Mexican and Basque herders to strum on." He pondered a few seconds. "Yes, I'll do better than that. I'll let him have all the newspapers that come to the ranch after we've

finished reading them, for of course he'll want to look at the market reports on mutton and wool!"

Ken Hobart surrendered but not without misgiving. "How are your wounds?" he queried.

"Nothing to worry about. Providentially Tom Antrim used steel-jacketed bullets fired at something over two hundred yards. The bullets had settled in their flight by the time they reached me, so they drilled nice, neat, round little holes that are healing beautifully. I'll be on the job again in a month."

CHAPTER X

CROOKED BILL'S well-laid plan worked with the smoothness of a piston—thanks to Roberta. Her heart, filled with sympathy for her rascally old uncle, was cheered considerably by the sight of Glenn Hackett's calm presence in the library when she came down to dinner. To her airy greeting he returned one of the utmost gravity, so Roberta, jumping instantly to the conclusion that Crooked Bill had been talking his affairs over with his lawyer, promptly precipitated the drama, much to the relief of the principal actors.

"Well, Glenn," she said, "has Uncle Bill been telling you his sad story?"

Hackett nodded owlishly.

"Do you see the slightest glimmer of a silver lining in the dark clouds that beset him, Glenn?"

"All appears to be lost save honor, Bobby."

Crooked Bill raised a protesting hand. "Let us not discuss it, if you please, Bobby. I am past help now, so let us forget it and glean what meager measure of comfort may possibly be wrung from my wasted career. Remember, girl, I'm not the whimpering kind."

"I know you're not, dear Uncle Bill. You're a perfectly good old sport."

"I admit I was knocked for the count at first, but now that I have my second wind—"

"Save it for your cigar, dear. I have just had a long telegram from my lawyer in Los Algodones, Texas. He informs me that the affairs of Uncle Tom's estate are in excellent shape and that he died leaving even more sheep than was at first suspected. They have all been counted and the wool crop is being garnered and placed in safety. There are about ten thousand lambs that will soon be ready for market and which should bring ten dollars a head and there are upwards of a hundred thousand pounds of excellent wool worth thirty cents a pound—why, it would seem that Uncle Tom's estate will run close to half a million dollars. We should worry and grow wrinkles and gray hair, darling."

The butler announced dinner—and between the fish and the roast, as per agreement, Glenn Hackett suddenly laid down his knife and fork and commenced to question Crooked Bill adroitly as to the exact nature of his operations in the market. And when Crooked Bill had answered all of his questions and Glenn Hackett had made a number of notations in a note-book, he resumed his meal in silence. Roberta, however, noted a grim little smile playing across his Puritanical face from time to time, so presently, with her customary impulsiveness, she asked him to share the joke with them.

"It's on your Uncle Bill," he replied. "At the risk

of being ungracious to my host, it is my duty to inform you, Bobby, that your Uncle Bill is an antediluvian idiot who can't see the woods for the trees. If he could he'd see a path out of this mess he's in—a path as wide as the boardwalk at Atlantic City. Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow Uncle Bill will no longer be a financial corpse. He will have commenced his resurrection. . . . By Jove, this is most excellent roast beef. I remember once I had a cut of roast beef in a restaurant out West, in the cattle country. I couldn't even bend it, much less eat it, so I said to the waiter, 'Waiter—' "

"How are you going to save Uncle Bill?" Roberta demanded sharply.

"I'll explain after dinner, Bobby."

"Explain now," the girl commanded. "Don't you see Uncle Bill is suffering?"

"Let him suffer. He deserves it."

"Glenn, dear, please—"

"Well, when you talk to me that way, Roberta, I can't resist." And thereupon Hackett proceeded to outline to her, patiently and in words of one syllable, his plan for the salvation of Crooked Bill.

"I understand perfectly, Glenn," Roberta said when at last he finished. "You're a wonderful, wonderful friend."

"The plan is vetoed," Crooked Bill declared virtuously. "Friendship will bear up under anything except the indorsement of notes or the swift heavy touch."

"But, Uncle Bill, if there is such a small element of risk—"

"No more, I beg of you, Roberta. There is a definite element of risk, and whether small or large, I will not have my friend accept it. I've had a bellyful of risks lately," he added vulgarly. "I do not crave a second helping."

"But, Uncle Bill—"

Uncle Bill raised his leonine head and his cold, steel-gray eyes flickered murderous lights at her. His mouth closed with a snick, like the door of a safe. "There will be no further discussion of this unpleasant subject," he informed her coldly.

When Crooked Bill looked and spoke in that tone of voice, Roberta knew from experience that obedience was incumbent upon her. Amiable and loving as he customarily was, there were times when he must not be trifled with, and this was one of them. Roberta's eyes filled with tears; in a tremulous voice she begged to be excused and withdrew.

Crooked Bill's wild eyebrows went up as the girl left the room. "She's as big a crook as I am," he declared proudly. "She isn't at all distressed. She's just pulling the old stuff—not on me this time, but on you, my boy. She expects you to follow her out and comfort her. She has just given birth to the bright idea we have planted in her brain, and now she wants to get you alone and spring it on you. Do not disappoint her, my boy. Forward! I'll sit here and masticate my fodder.

I shall not be lonely, Glenn, because I know you'll both be back for the dessert, and after that we'll have a fine large evening. Roberta shall sing for us."

"Are you quite certain she wouldn't prefer to be left alone, Mr. Latham? She's all upset. You gave her a burglarious look and there was murder in your voice."

"Listen to me, son. If you want to hold on to me as a client, if you ever expect to finger another retainer from Crooked Bill Latham, don't pester him with questions. I know my onions. The girl's play-acting. Vamose!"

Glenn Hackett "vamosed." Within five minutes he returned with Roberta on his arm.

"Hum!" Crooked Bill reflected. "And she spent at least a minute making up her face! Four minutes to put over her loving plot against me. The little crook!" He beamed upon her. "I'm so sorry I spoke crossly to my little girl," he announced with hypocritical unction.

Bobby kissed him fondly and gave him a little hug, the butler passed the roast beef for fresh hot cuts and Glenn Hackett began a discussion of international tennis, to be interrupted presently by Crooked Bill.

"I think you might tell Harms to serve some of my Pol Roger '98, Bobby," he suggested. "It will probably be the last bottle of real champagne we'll ever drink, but while we have title to the cellar let's go to it." He sighed. "I'm certainly going to miss my schnapps."

Had Crooked Bill lived in the days of Demosthenes there is no doubt but that he would have run the Oracle of Delphi out of business. Roberta did sing to them after dinner! However, Crooked Bill was not one to gum up his own finely laid plans, and presently, with a full realization of the truth of the old adage that three is a crowd, he withdrew to his room, leaving Glenn Hackett to make what progress he could with the rebellious Roberta.

But Crooked Bill did not retire. He was much too excited for sleep. Instead he lit a cigar and smoked until ten o'clock, at which hour he knew Glenn Hackett, a creature of habit, would depart for the city. So Crooked Bill went down the back stairs, crossed the lawn and waited for Hackett at the entrance to Hillcrest. "Did it work?" he demanded.

"Overtime," Hackett responded.

"I guess I'm not some little old prognosticator, eh?"

"You certainly know every convolution in Roberta's mind. I'm sure I never would. She'd outgame me every time she started."

"Was she nice to you after I left?"

"Well—er—ah—Platonic."

"Aggh!" Crooked Bill growled deep in his throat, like an aged tiger. "Go home, you jellyfish. You'd be a bachelor in the South Sea Islands—and on an island where they practice polyandry!"

Thoroughly disgusted he returned to the house and mixed himself a noggin of his favorite elixir.

He had a presentiment that Fate was, in a manner of speaking, stacking the cards against him.

There is nothing quite so satisfying and restful to a human being as the knowledge of a sly deed successfully, nay brilliantly, performed. It is not to be marveled at, therefore, that both Crooked Bill and Roberta slept well that night; at breakfast neither had ever felt nor looked so chipper in years, albeit, in order to accentuate his pose of abandon and despair Crooked Bill neglected to shave, had little to say during the meal and sighed gustily from time to time. He caught an early train to the city, explaining that the sooner he swept up the fragments of his scattered fortunes the better for all concerned.

Roberta motored in a little later and went at once to Glenn Hackett's office, where he prepared and she signed a formal assignment of all of her right, title and interest in and to her Uncle Tom's estate to Hackett, for and in consideration of certain moneys to be advanced to her by Hackett. The further details of saving something out of the wreck for her uncle she left to the lawyer.

"Now, then, Roberta," Hackett said when the document was signed, "you understand that this is a business deal from first to last. Not a speck of sentiment in it so far as I am concerned. While you have given me security for the funds I am to advance, it may be that I will be called upon to advance a sum in excess

of the total value of your Uncle Tom's estate. Consequently, it is of the utmost importance that the estate should be administered wisely and conserved. I have looked up your lawyer at Los Algodones, Don Prudencio Alviso, and he appears to have an excellent record for probity but is a poor business man. If I—"

"He assures me Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes is most reliable and is doing all that anybody can do to conserve the estate," Roberta hastened to assure Hackett.

"I know. But what do we know about Higuenes? Nothing except what we have heard and the fact that his correspondence would indicate he is a kindly, humorous and wonderfully obliging gentleman. But lawyers look at all things from a cold and conservative angle, and the thought occurs to me: Why is Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes taking all this trouble? What do you mean to him? He is a cattleman, so why should he bother with your sheep? My dear Bobby, I am highly suspicious of that fellow."

Bobby's lip drooped. She had not thought of Don Jaime in that light before, and her common sense warned her that there might be more than a modicum of truth in Hackett's suspicions. He saw the doubt he had planted burgeoning, and hastened to aid its growth.

"As I told you before, it is impossible for me to go to Texas to look after your affairs, Bobby, notwithstanding the fact that it would be a privilege to serve you. Unfortunately others have a prior claim on my professional services and I may not evade them. Your

unfortunate uncle dare not leave New York at this time either. His creditors might think he was endeavoring to flee the country. Consequently, I think it is of the utmost importance that you go to Los Algodones immediately and investigate everything thoroughly."

"But, Glenn, I don't know a thing about business, and I'm afraid it's too big an order. Quite usually I believe what apparently decent people tell me."

"I disagree with you. You have a feminine intuition of the highest degree of development. You could sniff out a crook at sight. If you go there, get acquainted with your lawyer and Don Jaime and, after a few weeks, discover that you have absolutely no mental reservations regarding either or both, I shall think it quite safe to leave your affairs in their hands for the present, at least."

This adroit speech flattered Roberta, since it was corroborating a belief she had always entertained, i.e., that she could look through men as if they were glass. Her respect for Hackett's intelligence and ability increased at once. "I'll go to Los Algodones just as soon as I can get ready," she declared.

"That's fine, Roberta." He escorted her to the elevator and upon returning to his office pressed a buzzer three times, whereupon his secretary ushered in to him from an adjoining room no less a person than Crooked Bill.

"Well, have you sold her the idea that she should go to Los Algodones?" he demanded of the lawyer.

"I have. She promised me she would go just as soon as she could get ready."

Crooked Bill rubbed his hands pleasurably. Hackett handed him the assignment which Roberta had just given him, and Crooked Bill set fire to it and dropped it into Hackett's metal waste basket.

"Have you confidence in this Jaime Higuenes, Mr. Latham?" Hackett queried.

"How do I know? He's a perfect stranger to me. However, his father and grandfather were both *muy caballero* to the nth degree and never cared enough about money to get it by crooked or unfair means. And I'm a great believer in heredity. I have a strong suspicion that Don Jaime is equipped with a complete set of Hibernian inner works, and I have never known a highly courageous man who was a weak man. The crooks of this world are recruited from the weaklings, my boy. However, why should I worry about a smear of sheep? I don't care two hoots in a hollow if they all starve to death. I'm solely interested in promoting for Roberta a journey to Los Algodones, in order that she may see the other side of the picture. Don Jaime is unmarried (I've discovered that) and if he fails to fall in love with Roberta he's fit for treason, stratagems and spoils. If she doesn't quarrel with him about that, they're bound to fall out over business, because no man ever managed a woman's business affairs without discovering in the long run that he had performed a thoroughly thankless task."

"I wish I didn't have to mix in her affairs. I dislike deception—even innocent deception, Mr. Latham."

"You ungrateful pup! Why, I've placed Bobby under a tremendous obligation to you and made it possible for you two to share a delightful secret in common—all of which is equivalent to scattering six inches of tanbark on the hard, macadamized road of true love. By pretending to lose my fortune I drive off about eighty per cent of your competitors and shoo Bobby out of her set, in which she might find other competitors for you. As a promoter I think I'm just about the bee's knees myself."

"But you're giving Don Jaime a free field."

"And why not? He's short and fat, weighing about two hundred pounds. If he isn't, the scientists are all wrong about heredity."

"I have known tall, graceful and extremely charming Irishmen, Mr. Latham!"

"But the Spanish blood predominates in Higuenes. At least it did in his father. They were originally Asturianos, and Asturianos are all medium-sized and stocky. But to return to Don Jaime. In all probability he takes a bath after the fall round-up and has never seen a bathtub except in a hotel. He will have a luxuriant, Niagara Falls type of black mustache and use perfume. He will talk with a strong Spanish accent and four-fifths of his life is undoubtedly spent in his shirt-sleeves. He's just a husky Border cowman, I tell you. Do you see Bobby falling for a man like that?"

"No-o-o!"

"You're a suspicious Yankee, Glenn. Your motto is: 'Trust everybody but cut the cards.' . . . Well, I must be toddling along. I think I'll take on a line of United Drugs. I've had a tip that they've been quietly absorbing about twenty-five hundred chain drug stores. Meanwhile you keep picking on Roberta to get her out of town; and in order to soothe your New England conscience I'm going to spread about a hundred thousand margining a line of United Drugs for you. If the deal shows a profit by the time you marry Roberta, it will be yours. If it shows a loss—send me a reasonable bill for professional services."

"As a pinch-hitter for Cupid I think you're a total ruin," Glenn Hackett declared.

"How come?"

"I'm satisfied that Roberta isn't in love with me."

"So am I. But I'm also satisfied that she thinks a thousand per cent more of you than of any man living, and if you remain indifferent to her—even let her see you out with another girl occasionally—you'll have to marry her in self-defense. Apples are most desirable when they are green, inside a six-foot barbed-wire fence and guarded by a savage bulldog." He shook his stick at Hackett. "Remember, your battle-cry is 'On to Texas!'"

CHAPTER XI

ROBERTA shopped for two weeks, spent another two weeks on a houseboat party among the Thousand Islands, and departed for Los Algodones. A spirit of thrift animating her at the last, she attempted to discharge her maid, but that faithful retainer, having been substantially subsidized by Crooked Bill, begged to be permitted to accompany her without salary. It seemed she had always yearned for a trip to the Far West. Besides, what would Miss Roberta do without her? Crooked Bill asked the same question and informed her that he had recently discovered a forgotten asset, in consequence of which he could afford the expense. "You'll require Mignon for a chaperon," he declared. "Eat, drink and be merry," he advised his niece, "for next week you'll be in the sheep business."

Roberta, who had never known what it meant to fend for herself when traveling, reluctantly permitted herself to be persuaded.

"Where shall I address you, Bobby?" Crooked Bill queried. "At the Mansion House, in Los Algodones?"

"No, dear. Address me in care of Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes."

"What?" Crooked Bill started as if bee-stung. "You

going to put up at the Higuenes hacienda? Why—why, the man's a bachelor."

"How do you know?"

"I've been making inquiries about him."

"Well, his housekeeper, a Mrs. Ganby, has written me, inviting me to be his guest. Don Jaime was ill at the time and couldn't write me personally, but he did write, at the bottom of Mrs. Ganby's letter, 'Official: J. M. H.' Mrs. Ganby says they have a lovely place and that I'll be much more comfortable at the Rancho Valle Verde than at any hotel in that country. She says Don Jaime instructed her to inform me that, while the Mansion House has an excellent reputation for service, that reputation is based entirely upon the fact that they have a bootjack in every room."

"That Don Jaime must be a comical devil," Crooked Bill murmured without enthusiasm. He was again assailed by the feeling that, in some inexplicable way, his well-laid plans were doomed to go aft agley. "You'll write me frequently and tell me all about it, won't you, honey?"

Roberta promised and kissed him good-by.

Five days later she and Mignon, with three huge trunks and five pieces of hand baggage, were deposited on a lonely, sun-warped platform at the little flag station of Valle Verde on the Houston and Texas Railway.

"So this," said Roberta, looking around her after the train had resumed its journey, "is Texas. Who was

the idiot who said he wanted free life, and he wanted fresh air, and that half his heart lies buried there, in Texas, down by the Rio Grande? Good gracious, Mignon, what is that noise?"

"It sounds like a zoo at feeding time," said Mignon apprehensively, and looked behind her. "Oh, it's cattle," she added, relieved.

A quarter of a mile out on the plain, in a compact mass, a huge herd of white-faced cattle were milling slowly and bellowing continuously—protests against the inhibition of their freedom imposed on them by numerous horsemen who rode around the fringes of the herd and urged it slowly forward.

"Why, there must be thousands of them!" Roberta gasped, and was grateful that the station platform, which was at least five feet off the ground, appeared to offer reasonable sanctuary from attack.

From around the corner of the station a man appeared, hat in hand. He approached in an embarrassed manner. "Miss Antrim?" he queried.

"Yes, indeed," said Roberta gratefully, and waited for him to name himself.

"I'm Bill Dingle, your Uncle Tom's general manager. I got your letter tellin' me you'd arrive today and instructin' me to meet you at the Higuenes rancho tomorrow."

"Yes," Roberta murmured, wondering if she ought to introduce Mignon to Mr. Dingle, who was eying the maid as a fresh cow in a pasture eyes a dog.

"So I thought I'd meet you here, miss, and explain to you how come it won't be possible for me to meet you there," Mr. Dingle went on, his embarrassment increasing at every word. "It's about twenty mile straight east from here to your Uncle Tom's ranch, which is your ranch now, I reckon, and I figgered maybe it'd be better for all hands if you put up there instead of at the Higuenes rancho. Of course it ain't as grand as the Higuenes place and mebbe it's far from what you been accustomed to, but I've had the place red up a lot and I've hired a new cook and a Chink boy to look after the house. And there's a pretty good roadster car there that belonged to your uncle. I reckon you and this other lady'd be as safe and comfortable there as anywhere."

"That is very kind of you, Mr. Dingle." Roberta hesitated, then, in her usual frank manner, plunged. "Why is it impossible for you to meet me at the Higuenes rancho, Mr. Dingle?"

Mr. Dingle scuffed a foot along the station platform and his embarrassment increased visibly. "Well, ma'am, in this country, when a feller's enemy warns him not to set foot on his ranch again until he's sent for, unless he wants to be made a colander out of, it's reasonable to figger the warnin's meant."

"Who warned you?"

"Don Jaime Higuenes."

"Indeed. By the way, what is a colander?" Roberta had never taken a course in domestic science and had

no hesitancy in admitting her ignorance of culinary utensils.

"It's a sort of dishpan with a lot of holes in it, ma'am."

"Oh! Why, I had no idea Don Jaime Higuenes was such a bloodthirsty man! Is the trouble between you something that cannot be rectified? I should be happy to act as peacemaker, Mr. Dingle."

Bill Dingle, remembering his offenses, was honest enough to declare that the trouble could not be rectified and added something about the easiest way out of trouble being to go around it. Then he was silent for quite a while, meanwhile scuffing his toe and gazing a bit helplessly around the horizon. Finally he said: "I reckon you didn't think as much of your Uncle Tom as he used to let on you did."

"I had never seen my uncle, Mr. Dingle; consequently he was no more to me, really, than a stranger. Our family regarded poor Uncle Tom as more or less of a black sheep."

"Well, he wasn't exactly a tuberose, I'll admit, ma'am; but he had his good points just the same, dependin' on the mood you caught him in. Still, he was one of your kinfolk. Don't you feel no resentment agin the man that murdered him?"

"Not the slightest. From all that we can learn, officially, Uncle Tom was not murdered. The sheriff of this county wrote that Uncle Tom made the mistake of taking in too much territory, which is a fatal error

and tantamount to suicide. It seems he ambushed Jim Higgins and shot him three times. Then Higgins got under cover and stalked Uncle Tom and killed him. I am informed that he didn't know the identity of his assailant until he saw the body."

"That's the story, but it ain't true. This killer ordered your Uncle Tom to quit grazin' his sheep on the free range or he'd kill him. A warnin's a warnin' in this country, an' if a feller don't choose to obey it he's justified in arguin' the matter in the smoke the first time him an' the warnin' person meet up. Your uncle didn't see no valid reason why he should have his liberty restricted by a private citizen. He considered his life in danger, so when they met up on the range it was a case of who could get into action quickest. It was a case of an old man agin a young man, an' the young man won—as usual. But your Uncle Tom never tried to kill nobody. He just naturally defended his own life an' failed to do a good job. An', of course, a sheepman ain't in good standin' in a cattle country. They got all the officials on their side, an' a fair jury just can't be got. Ninety per cent of the population of this county is greasers. You can buy 'em for five dollars."

"I have been informed, Mr. Dingle [Crooked Bill had been her informant], that it isn't considered a very reprehensible crime to kill a sheep-herder in this country."

"It's almost the principal outdoor sport, ma'am. An'

a greaser don't mind bustin' anybody. All that worries him is: Can he git away with it? Personally, I'm only a hired man, but I got my private opinions, an' I'm here to say it just naturally don't look right for you to be the guest of—"

Mr. Dingle raised his glance from the station platform and gazed across toward the approaching herd of cattle. He appeared alert, poised for flight; whatever had been in his mind to say remained unsaid, and he was profoundly interested in a horseman who was galloping around the flank of the herd, evidently with the intention of passing on in front of it.

"I reckon I'll be moseyin' along, ma'am," said Mr. Dingle. "We can discuss our business when you come to the Antrim ranch."

The horseman had cleared the herd and was coming on at an easy gallop; behind him a boy on a small pinto pony labored to keep up.

"There's the man that killed your Uncle Tom," Mr. Dingle almost hissed. "I reckon I don't care to meet that *hombre* until I can choose the time and place myself." And without standing upon the order of his going Mr. Dingle went—in a flying leap off the station platform. He lit running and continued on to a disreputable old automobile which Roberta had observed parked in the shadow of the stock cars; in an incredibly short space of time he was on his way home.

The horseman, observing Mr. Dingle's departure, spurred his mount to a furious gallop; apparently it

was his intention to intercept the latter as he fled down the dusty road that ran parallel with the tracks.

"He's going to shoot," Mignon screamed. "Oh, the brute!"

Six pistol shots rang out and Roberta saw little puffs of dust leap up beside Dingle's right rear tire. A pause of about two seconds—then six more shots and six more puffs of dust beside the same tire. Then the horseman pulled up, turned and jogged quietly up to the station. He dismounted a little stiffly, dropped the reins over his horse's head, and advanced limping to the station platform, upon which he climbed laboriously and disappeared into the station.

"Did you see, Miss Roberta?" Mignon whispered. "He was all smiles! A smiling murderer! Ugh!"

"Thank God a horse cannot outrun a flivver, Mignon. Nor can a man on a running horse do accurate shooting. The range was too long and all his bullets dropped short. I wonder if this pale child on the fat pony is the rascal's son?"

"This is exactly like the movies," Mignon quavered. "It's wonderful. So thrilling! Oh, I'm so glad you brought me with you, Miss Roberta!"

"When that man emerges you'll experience some more thrills," Roberta warned her maid. "I'm going to tell him some things about himself he has not, in all probability, been told before."

"Do be careful, Miss Roberta. He's so desperate—"

"I'll reduce him to pulp. I'm not afraid of his guns.

I intend to protect my foreman. That is the duty of an employer. This Jim Higgins had his own witnesses when he killed Uncle Tom, but we can testify to his effort to kill Mr. Dingle. I shall have him arrested and tried for attempt to commit murder. The bloodthirsty wretch!"

The station door swung open, and Don Jaime Higuenes limped out, stood as erect as his damaged underpinning would permit, bowed from the hips and all but swept the station platform with his sombrero. Then he straightened and said: "Mees—I mean Miss Antrim—I am devastated to think—"

"How dare you presume to address me?" Roberta cut in icily. "I am not aware that I have the dubious honor of your acquaintance, sir, although I believe you are my uncle's slayer, Jim Higgins."

He stared at her without rancor, nor did the pleasant smile that had crinkled his undeniably good-looking countenance fade the slightest. Roberta made swift appraisal of him. He was about six feet tall, strongly built, lithe and graceful. An out-of-doors, athletic girl herself, Roberta knew that this man was as hard as nails with scarce a pound of superfluous fat on him. His complexion was a reddish brown, a most agreeable color-scheme when taken in conjunction with crinkly jet-black hair and large, black, snappy eyes. "Black Irish," Roberta reflected, noting his thick, almost snubby nose, the broad upper lip and the square jowls. "The very worst kind of Irish!"

Don Jaime's hat was a soft light-weight white beaver, broad-brimmed, high-crowned, and pinched to a peak. He wore an immaculately clean white drill shirt, open at the throat, sans necktie and sans sleeves below the elbow. His overalls were blue and new and six inches too long for him, for which reason the excess had been turned up in a cuff over his expensive high-heeled boots. His spurs were of the approved stockman's pattern, brass with silver inlays and steel heel chains; around his waist was a wide, hand-carved leather belt supporting two pistol holsters carved to match. From each holster the pearl butt of a pistol protruded; there were spare cartridges in the belt.

"Yes, I am Jim Higgins," he admitted, without a particle of shame or embarrassment, and from the inflection of his voice, from a certain faint clipped manner of slurring his consonants, Roberta knew that Spanish was this man's mother tongue. "It was my misfortune to be the instrument of an inscrutable fate that wafted your delectable uncle to his mansion in the skies."

"Has anybody ever told you what a cool scoundrel you are, Mr. Higgins?"

Don Jaime shrugged. "I dare say a few sheepmen have said harsh things about me—behind my back."

"Do you enjoy killing men, Mr. Higgins?"

"Oh, no! Not even in self-defense."

Roberta had a feeling that she was not going to make much progress in the face of the man's debonair

indifference. "I never suspected my uncle's murderer was such a frontier dandy," she said witheringly.

Don Jaime drew one of his pistols, flipped six empty brass shells out on the station platform and thoughtfully reloaded the weapon. "One is liable to scare most anything out of the brush in this county, Miss Antrim. I suppose you entertained the popular impression that a frontier murderer is physically as well as morally unclean." He loaded the other pistol. "I'm sure I shouldn't be blamed if my parents preferred cleanliness to certain brands of godliness. The tree grows as the twig is bent, you know."

"Was your father a man of violence, Mr. Higgins?"

He nodded. "All the Higgins tribe have been scrappy."

"What do you mean by trying to shoot my foreman?"

"Why, it's the open season on sheep-herders. We're allowed one a day, and old Dingle Bell is the first I've flushed in a week."

"He'll be the last you'll flush in many years if there is such a thing as law and justice in Texas."

"Oh, we're very law-abiding, indeed! Very few of us on this side of the Rio Grande kill for pleasure or profit. You're going to have me arrested, I presume."

"I certainly am."

"Well, when the warrant is issued the sheriff will telephone me about it and tell me to come in and talk it over. He's too indolent to take the trouble to motor

out to my place and put the bracelets on me. By the way, what are you doing around here, anyway? Is it your intention to camp all night on this platform or were you expecting somebody to call for you? Is it possible that in a moment of exuberance I frightened Dingle Bell away and thus deprived you of your transportation?"

"No, I'll excuse you of leaving us stranded. Mr. Dingle would have departed in a little while, but not so precipitately. And it's none of your business what we're doing here. However, I do not mind telling you that we are waiting for Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes to send a car over for us. Do you know Don Jaime?"

"I've known him all my life."

"What sort of man is he?"

"We-ell, average, I'd call him. Just a fair sample of a greaser. Folks in this country don't seem to mind having him around. Guess Don Jaime has them fooled more or less. Are you certain Don Jaime knew you were due here today?"

"Why, I wrote him a week ago."

"Well, the hair must have slipped somewhere or he'd have had his car here to meet you—yes, and a light motor truck for your baggage. One thing Higuenes prides himself on is his punctuality and hospitality. To have a guest standing around on this hot platform all day waiting for a car that never came would just about break his heart. I'm very much afraid, Mees—I mean Miss—Antrim, that unless I get word to Don Jaime

that you're here, the station master will have to take you in. And I know he isn't equipped for company."

Roberta's troubled gaze met the young man's with just a hint of tolerance now. "I suppose you have your humane moments, Mr. Higgins. Remember, however, I am certainly going to prosecute you for the attempted murder of Mr. Dingle, so don't tangle yourself up in rash promises to render first aid. You may send word to Señor Higuenes if you wish, but all it will avail you is my thanks."

"You may even omit the thanks," he replied brightly. "I am delighted to have an opportunity to withdraw from your peppery presence, so with your permission, señorita, I shall ride swiftly to the humble abode of this fellow Higuenes and tell him to beat it over here like the devil with his car."

Again his hat swept the platform, before he climbed down and limped to his horse. "Did my Uncle Tom puncture your rear tire?" Roberta called after him derisively. He ignored her, climbed on his horse, spoke a few words to the boy who was waiting there for him, and set off down the road at a smart gallop.

"There goes the handsomest, most cultured, most interesting ruffian any woman will ever meet," Roberta declared. "I do hope his lameness will not be permanent."

"He's marvelous, gorgeous," breathed Mignon. "I wonder why he doesn't go in the movies."

"Mr. Higgins ought to get along beautifully in that

profession," Roberta sighed. "He certainly has admirable control of his temper. I couldn't seem to insult him. I wish that boy would come over here. I'd like to ask him some questions regarding Mr. Higgins."

But the boy had ridden away and joined the riders with the cattle herd.

In about an hour a handsome sedan appeared, accompanied by a speed wagon. Both were driven by youths of undoubted Aztec ancestry. Without a word they fell upon Roberta's baggage and stowed it in the speed wagon, whereupon the driver of the sedan approached, hat in hand and said:

"The señor Higuenes sends thees car and the compliments of heem to the señorita. Don Jaime tell to me to say to the señorita he ees ver' sorry he have make the bonehead play not to come before. Jus' now Don Jaime is ver' busy weeth wash heemself and make the shave for deener."

Roberta smiled at the naïve youth's report and entered the car with Mignon. "I wonder what Davy Crockett saw in Texas," she mused. "He died for it!"

CHAPTER XII

THE country through which they proceeded was brown and semiarid, a plain with deep dry barrancas, covered with a growth of stunted sage and mesquite; yet despite its aridity an unconscionable number of sleek white-faced steers lifted their heads to gaze at the car going by. The plain sloped upward as they proceeded west toward a chain of low bare hills that ran north and south, and gave no promise of the sudden change from the harsh uninviting range land to the lush greenness of cultivated lands beyond. As they reached the summit of this low range square mile after square mile of smiling green valley lay outspread before them. The temperature dropped noticeably, because of the westerly wind blowing gently across vast fields of alfalfa, which cooled it in transit. Evidently their chauffeur was aware of the beauty and comfort of the scene, for he stopped the car to give them opportunity to enjoy it.

"All thees," he said with a wave of his hand and a proprietary air, "belong to Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes. Maybeso I theenk two hundred t'ousand acres in all. *Mira, señorita.* You see those pueblo? For long time the Higuenes family have leeve here; one old Higuenes

he build those pueblo for the people maybeso one hundred years ago. Everybody in those pueblo work for Don Jaime. On the mesa you see the beeg white hacienda weeth the red roof. That is the home of Don Jaime. He is my good boss."

"You are very fond of Don Jaime?" Roberta queried.

"Hell, señorita, I die for heem. My father she's die for heem! One day we have beeg fight on the Rio Grande. Those bandits from Mexico come for steal the cows of Don Jaime. Do he steal it? I tol' you he don't get the chance. Don Jaim weeth his men cut heem off from the reever and there is one hell of a fight, and my father he is shoot through the belly. You know how he die? I tol' you. He die in the arm of Don Jaime Higuenes and Don Jaime he weep for see my father die. But my father she don' care goddam because she know Don Jaime theenk so much of her. My father she know Don Jaime not goin' to see family of Julio Ortiz to starve. And he know Don Jaime geeve heem big funeral, and maybe sometime on the round-up Don Jaime she sit by the fire weeth his boys and they get to talk old times and Don Jaime weel say: 'Well, Julio Ortiz was good man.'"

As the boy spoke he painted a picture, and to the imaginative Roberta every detail stood forth in bold relief. She felt her heart swell as the simple *peon* told his simple tale; she was impatient to see Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes for whom men died so gladly, solaced

at the last with the knowledge that they were his children and hence, beloved by him. She gazed across the lovely valley and thought:

"All those poor, simple people are sheltered under the mantle of his philanthropy. He is the master, the gentle despot whose slightest wish is their law. He is a feudal baron. Works with his men. Sits around campfires at night with his *vaqueros,* adjusting himself to comradeship with simple, primitive men and, doubtless, not finding it at all troublesome. Roberta, you're trembling on the brink of a great adventure. How I would enjoy having Glenn Hackett meet and know a man like Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes!"

The car rolled across wooden bridges over irrigation canals; and on the borders of a distant field Roberta saw a long queue of teams drawing mowers, the faint clatter of which was borne down wind to her. Dozens of hay wagons were loading and stacking the new-cut alfalfa hay; perhaps a hundred men were raking and piling it. The fragrance of the harvest came pleasantly to the girl's senses and it occurred to her that this valley had once been dry and barren until metamorphosed into a vast garden by men of vision, courage and faith. To her it seemed a big, worth-while thing to have done—something Homeric. There was drama in it—poetry, too. She knew no little man had done this, and that none but a big man could carry on with it. And her impatience to meet Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes increased.

They swept up through the Indian pueblo and were barked at and pursued by incalculable numbers of dogs of assorted breeds. "If Glenn Hackett were the overlord here he would banish those curs," Roberta thought, "and justify his act on the ground of efficiency and sanitation. But these *peones* must have their dogs and doubtless Don Jaime realizes that. Let them have dogs —millions of them. What affair is it of his? I dare say he has dogs of his own."

Assorted brown children, in varying degrees of nudity, stared and shouted at them; fat brown women, seated on door-steps or hanging over fences in homely gossip, bowed or curtsied; then they were through the pueblo and rushing up a gentle slope, through an avenue of oleanders, past great white barns and on to the ancestral home of Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes. The dusky driver sounded his siren long and with a primitive enjoyment in its harsh dissonance; a voice cried within the high adobe wall that surrounded the hacienda and great wrought-iron gates were flung wide to admit them. They halted under a red-tiled porte-cochère, and Mrs. Ganby came out to welcome them.

"Don Jaime begged me to present his excuses for his failure to meet you, Miss Antrim," she explained. "He has been working cattle with his men the past two days—they're shipping from Valle Verde station—and Don Jaime has only just gotten home and is busy making himself pretty. And this young lady with you is—"

"My maid, Mignon, Mrs. Ganby."

"You are fortunate to have brought her with you. Don Jaime has Mexican or Indian maids—I don't know which—to care for the house, but until I came he had nobody to train them and everything has been at sixes and sevens. I've been here about six weeks and am gradually getting order out of chaos. The guests at Valle Verde Rancho never exceed the guest-rooms, so your maid may have a room next yours. Do you speak Spanish, Miss Antrim?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"The servants understand nothing else. I am studying the language and am beginning to make myself understood. You have a modern bath with hot and cold water. Dinner is at six."

"Does Don Jaime dress for dinner?"

"He puts on his coat, even when we haven't got company," Mrs. Ganby laughed. "In this part of Texas men readily acquire the comfortable shirt-sleeve habit."

"What a lovely room!" Roberta exclaimed, as she entered. It was a large room—twice as large as an ordinarily large New York chamber—and furnished in an old-world elegance. In fact, Roberta, who knew something about such things, was satisfied that every article of furniture in the room had come from Spain and was at least three hundred years old. The huge, high four-poster bed, with its black and scarlet velure canopy, might have been the bed of some forgotten Castilian princess; there was a chest of drawers that made

her heart ache with the desire for possession. The windows opened onto the patio, and the scent of flowers filled the room. A cluster of roses occupied a vase on the dressing-table.

"Don Jaime plucked these and placed them here himself," Mrs. Ganby informed her. "He was in great distress at having you arrive a day earlier than we expected you. I fear you didn't figure your time-table correctly, Miss Antrim. Yes, this is the nicest room in the house. It was formerly Don Jaime's mother's room."

There were a number of family portraits hung along the walls, old-fashioned mementoes of a forgotten line of Higuenes rancheros and warriors, maids and dowagers. "Is there a portrait of Don Jaime here?" Roberta inquired. "I have never met him, you know."

"There was one here today—why, it's gone! Don Jaime must have removed it himself, Miss Antrim. Well, you'll meet him at dinner, and dinner will be served shortly after you have tidied yourself up a bit. Don't hurry."

She departed and Roberta settled down in a rocking chair while Mignon removed her shoes, undressed her and prepared her bath. She chose to wear that night the dress, shoes and stockings which had precipitated that unfortunate proposal on the part of Glenn Hackett, and was unusually critical of the manner in which Mignon prepared her bobbed hair. She wanted to look her best when she should meet Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes.

At last she was ready and made her way down the

corridor to the entrance hall. Mrs. Ganby was on the lookout for her, since in that vast labyrinth of a house strangers had been known to be lost, and led her into Don Jaime's spacious living-room.

At a small sideboard, his back toward her, stood her host. He was arrayed in flannel trousers and white buckskin shoes, a soft white silk shirt, a black silk bow tie, and a blue serge coat. Roberta was impressed by the extreme youthfulness of his figure, for she had anticipated a very much older man and, for a reason she had no ground for entertaining, she had expected him to be short and portly.

Mrs. Ganby spoke, thereby interrupting Don Jaime in his doubtless pleasant labor of shaking up a cocktail.

"Don Jaime!"

He turned. "This young lady is Miss Antrim, Don Jaime."

Don Jaime bowed. "You are welcome to my poor house, Mees Antrim," he said evenly, and advanced to take her hand.

"Jim Higgins!" she cried furiously.

"If you insist upon applying the literal translation of my monicker, James Michael Higgins is as correct as Jaime Miguel Higuenes. Dear me, can't you see the map of Erin on my face, Miss Antrim?"

Her eyes blazed at him. "You're a positive devil," she whispered as she reluctantly surrendered her hand to his. "Why did you deceive me at the station today?"

"Dear Mees Antrim, I did not deceive you. You

asked me if I were Jim Higgins and I admitted it. Then you started to work on me and I had a great curiosity to see how far you would go."

"If I had known you were Jaime Miguel Higuenes I would have had Dingle take me over to my late uncle's ranch."

"I feared the son of a gun was planning to take you there. You and your maid are the first women to get off at that station in a year, and when from a distance I observed you, I suspected your identity, suspected that for some reason you had arrived a day earlier than that named in your letter. So I started across to interview you—and then I saw Dingle Bell, as I call him, and instantly I was jealous. We Latins are a very jealous people, you must understand. So I tried to kill Dingle Bell—according to you—although what I really tried to do was to puncture his tire. I owe that man a poke and I wanted to annoy him. I thought if I could succeed in frightening him away before he had an opportunity to tell you too much—the things I wanted to tell you myself—I would be proving myself a very smart young man. Well, I succeeded, didn't I?"

Roberta's face went scarlet. "I'm so terribly ashamed —so—embarrassed."

"Nonsense. It was a grand joke—and I assure you grand jokes are few and far between in this part of the world. But that's the trouble with me. My Celtic blood is always playing tricks on my Latin nature. I'm too impulsive. I do things, only to regret the doing

of them. I'm very glad, indeed, to have you as my guest. I'll try to be a good host. Why, I galloped my poor horse half to death to get home and have the cars sent over after you! I was under the great necessity of getting the house ready for you, of having the cook drop your name in the pot, of sprucing myself up for the occasion—ah, say you forgive me, Miss Antrim."

"I loved the flowers you placed in my room, but it was scarcely fair of you to remove your photograph. That would have prepared me for this—ah—jolt."

"You had a jolt coming to you, Miss Antrim. You were much too snippy to poor Jim Higgins today." He threw back his black head and his bell-like laugh rang through the house. "That rascal Dingle had been talking to you and telling you things that weren't so, and I saw at once that you were perfectly willing to believe the worst of Jim Higgins, while holding Jaime Higuenes in a measure of respect."

"I—I can't believe you're a bad man," Roberta faltered.

"I'm not. I'm a lovely young feller, and your cussed uncle did give me a flat tire and make a south-paw out of me for a while. And I did bust him, good and plenty, and have no regret for my action. Why, I've known people who would pay out real money to secure the removal of relatives not half so obnoxious as Tom Antrim! I'm forgiven, am I not?"

Roberta eyed her host coolly. "I'll think it over."

He flushed and Mrs. Ganby, sensing the tension in the air, discreetly withdrew. Roberta found a chair and sat down without once removing her disapproving glance from the face of her host.

"Say it, by all means," Don Jaime urged.

"I'm sorry you deceived me—even by such innocent and undoubtedly amusing deceit. Your letters were so delightfully neighborly it seemed quite all right to permit myself to be under obligation to you. But if I had known that Jaime Higuenes and not Jim Higgins had killed my uncle I should not now find myself in the position of scolding my host, of regretting my acceptance of his hospitality."

He poured a little bit of the mixture in the shaker and sipped it thoughtfully. "Not such a good brew," she heard him murmur. "A little more French vermuth, I think."

"You bade me say it and you pay no attention to me," Roberta protested, angrily. She was not accustomed to being taken so casually.

"Oh yes, I did pay attention to you. You said—" He repeated her last long sentence word for word. "I would not ignore you. The most terrible offense an Higuenes can commit is to fail in politeness to a lady. Say on, Miss Antrim. I would be the last man on earth to use his hospitality as a gag to free speech."

"My Uncle Bill will think it very, very strange of me to accept the hospitality of my Uncle Tom's—ah—remover. How shall I explain it to him?"

"Don't," Don Jaime suggested meekly. "I'll do it. Give me Uncle Bill's address and I'll send him a wire tonight. That will give him an opportunity to register his kick tomorrow. If it seems to you then that you ought to leave Valle Verde my car will be at your disposal. By the way, are you a judge of cocktails?"

"No." Roberta snapped the words out.

"That's nice. So many young ladies of the present generation are. Do you drink a cocktail occasionally?"

"Occasionally—with my Uncle Bill and his guests."

"Hum-m-m! Well, Mrs. Ganby's a genial soul. She'll spare me the vulgarity of drinking alone. Poor Jim Higgins! Nobody loves him."

"It would be impossible not to like the rascal," Roberta admitted, "but one dislikes—"

"What?"

"To do something one dislikes doing."

"Then you dislike the task of liking me."

"Frankly, yes."

"I spent some time—probably all of ten seconds—contemplating that risk. Then I decided to assume it. A life without risk is as an egg without salt. Do you think Uncle Bill would object to your having just one apéritif with Mrs. Ganby and me?"

"No—and if he did I'd disobey him."

"I believe you would. You strike me as a rebellious person. Will you have one leetle—I mean little one?"

"Should I? We aren't really friends, you know."

"And not really enemies."

"How do you know?"

"Let us not get into deep water so close to the shore," he replied guardedly. "Were I to make an enemy of a woman as intelligent as you, I would regard myself as stupid. And I have no wish so to regard myself."

"You think rather well of yourself, do you not?"

He shrugged. "There are duller men and men harder to look at in Texas, now that you ask me about myself, although it's a subject to which I haven't given much thought heretofore. Shall we make a detailed appraisal?"

He saw he was infuriating her, and ten thousand Celtic devils in him egged him on to make a perfect job of it. "I'm not a runt physically nor a cripple mentally," he went on, shaking the cocktails slowly, a musing, far-away look in his eyes. "I'm six feet tall and there are no kinks in me. I am evenly proportioned and weigh a hundred and eighty pounds. There is no fat on me and I'm as hard and tough as rawhide. I have an honest open face like a grandfather's clock. Of course my nose is thick and snubby and I have a Maggie lip, and calluses on my hands, but to offset that I have brains enough to find my way around, which is a great comfort to me.

"Whatever I do is usually done pretty thoroughly. I shoot straight, and can ride anything I can cinch a saddle on. I know all about cows and horses and mules and their home life. I am a graduate of the state university and speak excellent Spanish, good English, and

fair French. I inherited a competency and have added to it by hard work and the exercise of shrewd trading with shrewd gringos. I have many mouths here on Valle Verde to feed and I enjoy feeding them.

"I can play the piano rather well, although I cannot read a note because my father had an old-fashioned prejudice against males who play the piano. He didn't want men to call his son 'professor.' I tickle a guitar, a mandolin, or a banjo quite well, and while I sing more or less melodiously, I have not a tenor voice, which is a big factor in my favor. I know how to order a dinner and I am a past master in a masculine art which has gone into the limbo of forgotten things! I can carve a roast perfectly and when it comes to dissecting a bird I'm not one to spatter myself with gravy and get the brute in my lap. I do not wear a scarlet tie with green socks, either. Now, let me see what else I do." He cocked his head and eyed the ceiling.

"That's enough of your good points," Roberta assured him dryly. "Now show me the other side of the picture."

"I can cuss very fluently on occasion and I have even been known to acquire a joyous little bun, although normally I am a temperate man. I smoke cigarettes and out on the range I chew tobacco. It keeps a fellow from getting thirsty. If you ever saw me flogging one of my *peones* you'd say I was a brute, but the *peon* wouldn't think so. He'd know he was getting what he deserved and that he can always bank on receiving

from me absolute justice. I'm quarrelsome—with men who like to quarrel—and I have a choice collection of scars gleaned in physical combat. I hold grudges and I have a quick and furious temper when I choose to let it get out of control—which I sometimes do. I'm jealous of my rights and nobody can walk on the tail of my coat and get away with it. No human being can patronize me and if I should ever get married I'll be the head of my house. I shall insist on a few simple but inflexible rules from the altar to the grave. I'm not very immoral, as men go, but I'm no spray of sweet clover, either."

Roberta pondered, studying the toe of her slipper. "Well, I hope you'll never chew tobacco in my presence," she said finally. "I couldn't stand that. It's so horribly plebeian."

"I'm a stickler for my liberties, Miss Antrim, so I'll chew whether you're around or not. However, I'll not be ostentatious about it. I can juggle my cud so adroitly you'd never notice I was chewing. And I never stain my lips."

"How fortunate."

"Well, it's more than you do. You've got too much lipstick on now."

Roberta felt she could die happy if she could but throw an egg or an alarm clock at him. She compromised by taking a small mirror out of her bag and studying her lips carefully. "I believe you're right," she admitted presently, and wiped away about fifty per

cent of the rouge. When she looked up, his black eyes were dancing with mirth.

"Well, Miss Antrim, we've finished the appraisal. What am I worth?"

"Worth knowing, I dare say, if only to kill time. Do call Mrs. Ganby in and quit shaking those cocktails."

"It's prescription liquor and supposed to be well shaken before taking. So it seems we're going to be friends, after all, eh?"

"I have some sense of propriety, Don Jaime. One does not quarrel with one's host."

He called Mrs. Ganby and when she entered Bobbie was holding to her hand. The boy wore a hat of the most approved cowboy pattern, with a rattlesnake band around it. His thin legs were encased in tiny chaps.

"I rode all the way home with Ken, Jimmy," he shouted, "and I'm not tired." Then he saw Roberta and removed his hat. Don Jaime formally presented the boy, then snapped his fingers at Robbie and the little chap limped over to him.

"Well, old hoss," Don Jaime greeted him, and scooped the boy up in his great left arm. "We had a fine ride today, didn't we? But you disobeyed orders, Robbie. I told you to ride home with the cook in the chuck wagon and lead your pony behind. You've overdone it, son. What are we going to do about that, eh?"

Robbie looked distressed. "But I felt so good, Jimmy—" he began.

Don Jaime shook him and set him down. "I put you on the payroll at ten dollars a month. At the end of the month you'll collect nine. You are fined a dollar for disobedience of orders."

The boy threw his arms around Don Jaime's waist and looked up at him almost tearfully. "Are you angry with me, Jimmy?"

"Of course not. Do you think I'm a short sport? But an order's an order and given to be obeyed. You promised to obey me, son, and you must learn that a promise must be kept. Understand? No matter what happens, a man must keep his promises. It's costing you a dollar to learn that, and the lesson would be cheap at double the money. Run along now and wash your face and hands and get ready for dinner."

Roberta caught the boy's mother's glance fixed on Don Jaime with a sort of maternal adoration. "That boy requires manhandling," Don Jaime assured her. "That atrophied leg must be built up with exercise, but we must proceed slowly. Good little lad, Robbie, but his doting ma has given him an imperfect notion of the sacredness of a contractual relation. I fined him a dollar, and that's mighty hard on Robbie, but"—he looked down at Mrs. Ganby with his kindly grin—"I have a wire-haired fox terrier pup coming for him tomorrow. If Robbie should ever lose confidence in me I'd be out of luck."

He poured the cocktails and served them. "Ladies! To your beautiful eyes," he toasted, and added to Roberta. "And confusion to your old Uncle Bill!"

"Idiot!" Roberta gasped, and strangled with laughter. She had suddenly visualized Glenn Hackett standing beside Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes and the comparison was—well, Roberta laughed!

To be called an idiot by one's guest is not exactly a compliment, nevertheless it bucked Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes up considerably. "I've never been called an idiot before," he retorted gravely. "Yet, for some strange reason, I feel pleased."

"I didn't mean you, of course, Don Jaime," Roberta hastened to assure him. "I was thinking of somebody else just then."

"An idiot?"

"On the contrary a very intellectual, splendid gentleman of my acquaintance."

"Well, I'm glad you've pigeonholed him at last, whoever he is. I don't like him. And I agree with you that he'd never do for Texas. Not flexible enough. What sort of fellow is your Uncle Bill?"

"Oh, Uncle Bill's human—very. He was born and raised in Texas. Spent most of his early life in this state, in fact."

"In what line of endeavor?"

"Cows."

"On a large scale?"

"Oh yes!"

"I should know him or of him then. What's his last name?"

"Latham. William B. Latham."

Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes set down his glass and

stared at her. "Is Uncle Bill slightly lame in his off hind leg—just a suspicion of a limp?"

"Yes. Do you really know my Uncle Bill?"

"No, I do not. But my late father knew him very well. They got into an argument once as to which was the best for the country—the gold standard or Bryan's sixteen-to-one silver insanity. Your Uncle Bill was an outcast in Texas, at the time being a Republican. My father, of course, was a Democrat. In their argument they waxed personal, and finally your Uncle Bill called my father a damned anarchistic greaser. So my father yelled: *'Hurroo! Faugh-a-ballagh!'* and hit your Uncle Bill on the nose and canted it five degrees to the southeast. My parent then ran to his horse to get his gun, which he wore in a pommel holster, and on his way there your Uncle Bill shot his hat off. This was getting personal, so my father retaliated by shooting your Uncle Bill in the heel."

"Why, Uncle Bill never told me about that, Don Jaime!"

"Why should he? He came off second best, didn't he? He was drunk at the time and my father was intoxicated, otherwise there would have been two funerals. Father was heartbroken when he sobered up, and sent his lawyer to your Uncle Bill to apologize, so your Uncle Bill accepted the apology and sent back one of his own. When I was a very small boy your uncle sold out his ranch to old man Hobart, whose son, Kenneth, is now my general manager."

"How tremendously interesting, Don Jaime."

"Well, it's nice to find out who has proud flesh and who hasn't. You were certainly saddled with a prize pair of uncles, weren't you? Does Uncle Bill treat you with civility and decency?"

"Of course he does. He's adorable. He's a love."

"Very well, then, I'll not kill him. You must agree, though, that I did you a real service in bumping off old Uncle Tom."

"Uncle Bill says you did," Roberta admitted. "But then he's biased."

"My father always declared that Uncle Bill was all wool and a yard wide. I wish you'd brought him down with you—no, I do not. I don't want him around cramping my style. . . . Dinner's ready, thank God. That stout saddle-colored female who appeared in the door just now says we'd better come and get it or she'll throw it out. . . . But Robbie isn't here, yet. . . . Well, time for another cocktail. What, only one? I'm glad of it. Proves your Uncle Bill has raised you in the way you should go."

"What an extremely old-fashioned young man you are, Don Jaime."

"Please do not call me Don Jaime. The don is really a title of respect, and is used by one's employees or social inferiors—rather like having a Pullman porter address you as 'judge' or 'colonel.' You may call me Mr. Higgins, Mr. Higuenes, James, Jim, Jimmy or Jaime."

"Very well, Mr. Higuenes," the girl murmured in a very small voice. Then: "Hold everything, mine host. I must run to my room for a handkerchief. I forgot to fetch one."

Don Jaime gazed after her. There was no doubt but that he approved of her mightily. When his gaze shifted it met Mrs. Ganby's.

"How does she impress you?" she queried. Mrs. Ganby had a brimming measure of feminine curiosity.

"Miss Antrim is physically beautiful and mentally alert. Yes, she's as smart a young woman as you and I will ever meet. Well raised, well spoiled, haughty, aware of her power over men and just loves to use it. Sound at heart, though, I think. Nothing spurious about her!"

"I think she has a temper."

"Of course she has. If she didn't she'd be dull. But I do not think she holds grouches, for her sense of humor would preclude that. And she's too healthy, too normal, to be a picky woman. After hanging a mouse on her enemy's eye she'd run to the drug store to buy a leech to put on it. I like her. She lights up my old house."

"Will she be here long, Don Jaime?"

"I do not know. In all probability she will not be here long enough to please me. In fact if I hadn't run that Bill Dingle scalawag down the road she wouldn't be here now. She's a new note in life to me, but I'm not going to let her know she is." He looked at his

housekeeper seriously. "Do you realize, Mrs. Ganby, what a serious thing it is to have killed a sheepman that wanted killing, only to discover he has a niece that can set a man's reason tottering on its throne?"

Mrs. Ganby was amused at his frankness. "Has Miss Antrim set your reason tottering on its throne already?"

"No. I do not totter that readily—not in fact until I know that the object of my delusion is worth tottering for. But something tells me this young woman has possibilities."

He limped to the piano and struck a few mournful chords, for over the glow of his new-found delight something was casting a somber shadow.

It was the corpse of old Tom Antrim!

Roberta had disclaimed any affection for her late uncle—had told him they had never met. Nevertheless, Don Jaime feared fireworks, for his was clannish blood, on both sides of his family tree. To him, a kinsman was a kinsman and blood was always thicker than water. Also, he knew he had, in a measure, trapped Roberta Antrim, surprised her; and although he did not know very much about women he did know that the sex desires a monopoly on triumphs and surprises and resents being taken at a disadvantage.

CHAPTER XIII

ROBBIE, his pale face glowing from his recent ablutions, arrived with Roberta and the four went in to dinner. With a nice consideration for her years, the host placed Mrs. Ganby's chair for her, then performed a similar service for Roberta and lastly for the little crippled boy.

"Instinctively kind," Roberta thought. "Old-fashioned father taught him to respect age. Democratic, too. His housekeeper eats with us."

Don Jaime's voice interrupted her cogitations. "Robbie has always been accustomed to saying grace before and after meals, Miss Antrim. Robbie!"

Robbie bowed his head and piped a shrill and hurried blessing. Roberta had a feeling that Don Jaime was an unorthodox man and had never thanked the Lord for anything he had to labor for, but she thought it nice of him to defer to the boy and his childish practice of giving thanks.

The table had been set in the gallery, Don Jaime explaining that during the summer they always ate outside. They were no sooner seated than two Spanish mocking-birds flew in and lit on the floor beside his chair.

"Abélard and Héloïse," Don Jaime explained. "Mockers seldom migrate and these two have been steady boarders for years." He broke crumbs from a piece of bread and fed the birds.

Roberta appraised the table with the eye of an expert. It was covered with a white linen cloth; short-stemmed red roses peeped from a jade-green bowl in the center; the service was of sterling silver and very old and beautiful. On closer inspection she saw that it carried a coat of arms.

"My great-great-great-grandmother's silver," Don Jaime explained. "Fellow in New York once heard I had it and sent his secretary down to buy it. He offered me an unbelievably high price for the service and didn't seem to believe me when I told him it was not for sale. He just kept tilting the ante and couldn't seem to see he was annoying me. Some people are like that. They think money is the beginning and the end of everything."

"Perhaps you would, also, Mr. Higuenes, if you had ever been poor," Roberta suggested.

"I've paid twelve per cent for rented money," he retorted. "I've had the ranch mortgaged in bad years and banks carried my father half his lifetime. Only those who are poor in spirit, who lack courage, can be really poor. Do you think my people, who dwell in the pueblo yonder, are victims of poverty? Not so. They are envied by their kind."

"Do you not find life a little lonely here?"

"A busy man is seldom lonely. My father spent his life in bondage to the irrigation system you probably observed en route here, but after his death I completed it and transformed a semiarid valley into alfalfa and cotton fields. I got rid of the scrubby long-horned cattle that were built for speed and substituted Herefords, which are built for beef. All this has been a considerable task and fell to my hands when I was eighteen. That was ten years ago. At college I majored in agriculture and cattle husbandry, because I knew that was going to be my job. My foreman, Enrico Caraveo, ran the ranch then and while I was in the army.

"After I was demobilized in the spring of 1919 I really started to put this ranch on a paying basis. I cleaned up on cotton in 1919 and '20. And cattle prices were unbelievably high. Why, a thin old cow for a cutter or canner was worth eighty dollars then! I had a feeling, however, that such a war-time prosperity wouldn't last, so I sold all my cattle in the fall of 1920, and in 1921 I didn't plant any cotton. Well, the market smashed on both—and lucky Jim didn't have any!

"Instead I raised alfalfa and stacked it; then I bought cattle for a song when the banks and the governmental loan agencies foreclosed. Cheap cattle and cheap feed, you know. I sold them as three-year-olds after the market had rallied, and in addition had my ranges restocked with high-grade Hereford stock cattle. But all this, you understand, Miss Antrim, required thought and worry and some courage. I had my mo-

ments of panic; the road was rough and rocky in spots, although that, of course, made it all the more interesting, the victory all the more delightful. I think that when one has had to fight for his land and his people he learns to love both, no matter how unlovely or uninteresting they may appear to those whose lives have been spent in shelter and without effort."

"My life has been spent that way, I must admit," Roberta confessed. "And I like it," she added.

"Why not? You've never tried any other life, have you?"

Roberta noticed that her host was much more at his ease, now that their conversation had veered into new channels. His accent was less marked. Not once did he forget himself and pronounce his "i's" as "e." It occurred to the girl too that Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes had lived more in five minutes of his colorful life than had the last three generations of Hacketts. And the Hacketts were a long-lived race.

"Don Jaime is in love with life," Mrs. Ganby suggested. "How wonderful, never to be bored with life, to wonder what it's all about and whither it leads!"

"Robbie," Don Jaime admonished gently, "when the soup is hot—and this soup is hot as can be—it's a good idea to permit it to cool rather than to blow fiercely upon it in the spoon. Only yesterday I was reading in the Book of Etiquette that it is no longer considered polite to cool the soup with the breath. So I've stopped doing it myself."

"All right, Jimmy. I'll stop, too," the little fellow replied, unconscious that he had been rebuked, so gently had the rebuke been administered. "Whatever you do is right. Ken Hobart says so and he ought to know."

"You're a good boy, Robbie. Excuse me for reminding you, but the time to mention a thing is when one thinks about it." Don Jaime turned to Roberta. "By the way, what gainful occupation, if any, does Mr. Latham practice now?"

"He plays the stock market."

"With success, I hope."

"He has always been very successful until recently, when he lost practically everything he had—or at least he would have lost it without the aid of some people who love him. We anticipate a reverse in the market which will pull him out, if not with a profit at least without terrific loss."

"My father loved your Uncle Bill, even if he did shoot him in the heel and disagree with him politically. I would be glad to give my father's friend a leg up. You live with your Uncle Bill, I take it."

"I've been his ward and a member of his household since my tenth birthday. He has always taken wonderful care of me. Indeed I have never known a wish he hasn't hastened to gratify, at whatever cost. So, you see, now that he's old and liable to suffer financial reverses, it is my duty to take care of him, and for that reason my Uncle Tom's estate comes to me somewhat in the nature of a godsend."

"One more reason why I should be dealt with charitably in the matter of your deceased avuncular relative," the young man suggested humorously. "Well, we'll pull you out all right on the sheep."

"I understand the estate is boarding on you, Mr. Higuenes.

Don Jaime shrugged. *"Es nada,"* he replied. "That is, the grass they consume doesn't amount to that," and he snapped his fingers.

"Nevertheless," the girl persisted, "you must permit the estate to reimburse you for it. In the protection of my interests you have certainly been put to some trouble and expense."

"The knowledge that I am serving a distressed lady is a rich reward."

Two maids removed the empty soup plates and set the roast down in front of Don Jaime. "A wild turkey," he informed Roberta. Then he sharpened his carving knife on the steel and attacked the bird, dissecting it in a very neat and scientific manner. "A youthful patriarch," Roberta thought. "His father's ways are his ways—and I'm not so certain they aren't preferable to our modern custom of carving the roast in the butler's pantry."

He looked up and read her thoughts in her watchful eyes. "I prefer it this way," he remarked. "And I wish I had about twelve little Higueneses to carve for. Can you cook, Miss Antrim?"

"Heavens, no!"

"I had heard it was a lost art with the rising generation. I'm a rattling good cook, myself, if I do say so. Most Latin males are, you know. I enjoy cooking fish and game."

"Do you play billiards?"

"Well, rather. Another game that appeals to my Latin blood."

"How about boxing?"

"Great sport. I have three *vaqueros* who are paid five dollars a month extra to box with me."

"That, I suppose," said Roberta dryly, "appeals to your Irish blood. Are you of a religious turn of mind?"

"Well, I built a church in my pueblo and I support a *padre* for my people. I play the organ in my church and I've rehearsed the choir until it's really rather good. You must come to mass with me tomorrow and listen to it."

"I asked if you were of a religious turn of mind, Mr. Higuenes."

"Well, make a guess."

"I should guess that religion, with you, is not exactly a ruling passion. Do you check your guns with the sexton when you go to mass?"

"You're smart. I thought you were."

"Why were you armed today? Do you always carry that arsenal?"

"No," he replied soberly. "I do not. But of late I have felt that discretion might be the better part of

valor. You see, I have been unfortunate enough to make some new enemies recently. The last time I went abroad unarmed I was carried home on a stretcher."

"I fear," the girl suggested, "that the Antrim sheep are proving to be a source of embarrassment to you."

"Oh, not at all! My enemies never embarrass me, I assure you." He said it so simply, so earnestly, so absolutely without brag or bounce, that Roberta laughed aloud.

"You *are* a new note in life," she declared. "Mrs. Ganby, do you not find Don Jaime a source of profound amusement?"

"Don Jaime, I must admit, is—different," Mrs. Ganby replied guardedly.

"I'm sure of it, Mrs. Ganby. He isn't a bit religious, but he is very charitable— so charitable, in fact, that I am certain he is obliging me, in the matter of those sheep, at considerable loss and nuisance and inconvenience to himself."

"Not at all," her host protested. "I expect to collect from the Antrim estate a reasonable fee for my services, to reimburse me for my outlay or inconvenience."

"Why, Jimmy!" Robbie had piped up. "Don't you remember telling me the other day that no gentleman ever told a lie—not even a white lie?"

"Now what are you driving at, Robbie?"

"I heard you tell Ken Hobart the other day that you'd see those damned sheep in hell before monkeying with them, if anybody but Miss Antrim owned them."

"So I did, sonny. Anything wrong with obliging a lady?"

"But you said the sheep would do more damage to the range than they were worth."

"I know I did, Jimmy, but then I was angry at the time. One of those old ewes had just bitten me."

"But you knew she couldn't hurt you, Jimmy, because I heard Ken tell you the old ewes were all more or less toothless. And then you said: 'Oh, hell, Ken, let's let the tail go with the hide! Drive the old wrecks up into the alfalfa, so they won't starve to death.' And Ken said he never knew a photograph to affect a level-headed man worse than it had you."

"Robbie," his mother said severely, "leave the table."

"What for?" the terrible boy protested.

"You talk too much and you talk out of your turn," his mother informed him. "For that you will have to eat in the kitchen hereafter."

"Oh, Jimmy! Do I have to go? I haven't done anything wrong, have I?"

Don Jaime sighed deeply. "We'll forget it, Robbie. You're just a penance inflicted on me because I'm such an irreligious man. Mrs. Ganby, if Robbie will agree not to speak again unless spoken to, I wish you would permit him to remain."

Robbie got up and put his arm around Don Jaime. "You're a wistful little fiend, Robbie," the latter growled, and gave him a return hug. "What a pity you

can't speak Spanish when you have a desire to divulge confidences!" He was blushing as he met Roberta's glance. "The subject of sheep having been discussed thoroughly," he suggested, "what opinions, if any, have you, Miss Antrim, on the League of Nations and the World Court? Do you admire *vers libre,* and is a stump-tailed yellow dog the best for coons?"

He was too much for her, and deep in her soul Roberta, grudgingly but admiringly, admitted it. She had a feeling of helplessness in this man's presence, for he was a new experience with her. She had never met a man who remotely resembled him—so ruthless, forceful and dominating. She saw he had seized upon Robbie and was already bending that immature soul to his own way of thinking, imbuing him with touches of his own primitive, direct-action brand of personality, with the result that it had now back-fired on him. She knew, too, he was embarrassed, secretly infuriated, perhaps; yet he had not scolded the boy or chilled the tremendous faith and affection Robbie evidently had conceived for him.

Not knowing what to say, Roberta was silent and attacked her meal. When presently, her glance met Don Jaime's again he was smiling at her, whereupon she itched with a desire to pull his undoubtedly Celtic nose. "He has all the audacity and assurance of the Irish and all of the ego of the Latin," she thought. "What an indolent, semi-insolent glance he has! And he isn't good-looking at all. Still he isn't bad-looking.

He's just masculine and knows it. All of his life he has been accustomed to being high and low justice on this ranch; because these *peones* of his kotow to him he thinks he can get away with murder. He's just a Mexican feudal baron who has established his feudal sway just far enough north of the Border to make good with it."

"But, really, I don't do anything of the sort, Miss Antrim," she heard him protesting.

Roberta was amazed. "I haven't accused you of doing anything except being kind to me at the cost of loss and inconvenience to yourself."

"Oh, but you have. Just now you registered on that part of me which is occult, clairvoyant, telepathic. We Celts are not infrequently so highly developed psychically that certain personalities can tune in with us."

"Indeed!"

"You think I'm a very fresh and frequent young man, imbued with the belief that I can do what I please and make everybody like it."

"A guest may not argue so personally with her host," the girl reminded him. His amazing intuition nonplused her.

"As I have already assured you, I wouldn't think of using my hospitality as a gag to free speech. . . . How do you like that wild turkey? It excels the domestic variety, I think."

"I agree with you. Doubtless it partakes of that quality by reason of the fact that it was raised and

killed on your ranch. Environment is productive of certain characteristics, and as a man you rather excel the domestic variety, I think. Is it possible for one to send a telegram from your ranch, Mr. Higuenes?"

"Certainly. After dinner you can telephone your message to the office at Los Algodones and charge it to my account."

"I suppose I should go to Los Algodones in a day or two to consult with my attorney."

"Well, the longer you delay your visit, Miss Antrim, the more agreeable it will be to Prudencio Alviso. Prudy's almost a full-blooded Spaniard. About one thirty-second Aztec or Yaqui, but that's enough to make him want to take life easy. Be kind. Your visit will cause him to bestir himself."

Roberta laughed again—softly, suddenly, for again she had a swift vision of Glenn Hackett and compared the activities of his law office with the somnolent status of Don Prudencio's legal mill.

"I feel like Alice in Wonderland," she declared suddenly.

"Speaking of bees and birds and sealing-wax, and cabbages and kings," said Don Jaime, "I am sincerely delighted to have sold Prudy to you. He's so slow, so deliberate! I know he'll just lengthen out your visit to the Rancho Valle Verde until you get to like the country. Just now you think my country's bare and lonely and desolate, but—it will grow on you. That low ridge of rocky hills off to the east is beautiful in the early

morning and late afternoon lights. To one unaccustomed to wide horizons there is born, in Texas, a feeling that one is lost. But presently one discovers that out of all this loneliness and vastness a surprising number of good-natured and contented people come; they're friendly and they do not talk too much, although they do talk to the point. Their conversation is about things that would not interest you at first, but when you become interested in those things—local killings, boll-weevil, grass, the price of beef, droughts, Border disturbances, politics, riparian rights, anthrax and hoof-rot in sheep—the days pass, rather pleasantly."

"I should die if I had to develop an interest in such things."

"Indeed! Why, you're already profoundly interested in a local killing, hoof-rot in sheep, grass, droughts, riparian rights and the market price of mutton and wool! Perhaps you do not realize this, but you are. Tomorrow your heart is going to go out to a collection of pitiful little bummer lambs and you're going to ask me how we can save them."

"What's a bummer lamb and why does he have to be saved?"

"He's a lamb that's lost his mother before he's weaned. She has died, perhaps, or again her lamb may have lost the peculiar odor by which his fool mother is enabled to recognize him. So he wanders around, bleating for milk, and slowly starves to death, because

no ewe will permit him to suckle her. Tomorrow we'll ride out and I'll show you your bummer lambs. I'll miss my guess a mile if, after that, you find yourself without a serious interest in Texas, Mees—I mean Miss—Antreem—Antrim."

"He's secretly excited and disturbed," Roberta thought. "Pronouncing 'i' as 'e' again. I wish dinner were over."

Providentially, it was not a long course dinner, such as Roberta had expected would be served and which she had looked forward to with dread. A soup, a salad, a roast, two vegetables, a light dessert and black coffee. That was all.

"He runs his household like a sensible man, at any rate," the girl reflected. "And I hazard the thought that the average rancher possessed of a fine old gallery, facing on such a lovely old-fashioned garden as this patio contains, would eat inside!"

She watched a humming-bird flitting from flower to flower, saw a quail come forth and bear away a crust tossed him by Don Jaime. Then, as the shadows lengthened, the mocking-birds, replete with food and happy, perched in a lime tree and paid for their meal in melody. Roberta had never heard a Spanish mocker before and was delighted with the beauty and variety of their extensive repertoire.

CHAPTER XIV

"YOU are fond of music?" Don Jaime queried. Roberta nodded and he tossed a quick order in Spanish to one of his dusky maids.

"Going to turn on the radio," the girl thought. "Why does he do it? It spoils everything."

Again she had evidence of the fact that, whether she wanted to or not, she was destined to tune in with this man's peculiar personality. "Not the radio, señorita, nor yet the victrola," he said gently. "I prefer the music of my people."

From behind the climbing passion vines on the gallery across the patio a guitar was strummed; Roberta heard the mellow notes of a harp as unseen fingers ran the scale. Then a girl's voice—without much volume, but wondrously sweet and sympathetic—commenced to sing "La Golondrina."

"When I am unhappy," Don Jaime explained, "they sing that sad song to me and make me unhappier."

"Why don't you have them sing something joyful? They will sing whatever you desire, I take it."

"My dear Miss Antrim, no Higgins ever wants to be made happy when he's unhappy. It's like enjoying poor health. We must feed our racial melancholy."

"You incorrigible Celt! Are these professional entertainers brought out from Los Algodones?"

"No, they're part of the ranch assets. That harp has been in our family since the first Higgins emigrated to Madrid. Carmen Caraveo, my riding boss's daughter, yearned to play it, so I sent her to El Paso for six months to get the hang of it. After that she had to figure it out for herself. She'd never do for the Metropolitan Opera, of course, but she's pretty good for this corner of Texas. When she has finished singing 'La Golondrina' to her own accompaniment her sister Conchita will strum a wicked guitar and sing 'El Cielo'— Hello, bub, you getting sleepy? Tired after your long ride today, eh? I told you so."

Robbie had left his chair and climbed up into Don Jaime's lap; his thin little arm was around the brown, powerful neck, his head cuddled under the big square chin. Don Jaime held him close with his left arm, and Roberta noticed that with his right hand he gently massaged the atrophied muscles of the boy's left leg.

The purple shadows crept over the patio, the music sobbed and mourned behind the passion vines, and the saddle-colored maid came out with some meat scraps on a plate and set them on the table beside her master, who whistled shrilly, whereupon two English setters crashed the screen door leading to the gallery and came leaping to accept, in the polite manner of their breed, the meat scraps Don Jaime fed them; retiring, when the meal was finished, to a discreet distance, where they

sat on their hunkers and gazed at the master with love in their lambent brown eyes.

Presently Don Jaime shook Robbie gently. "Come, son," he said softly. "Say your prayers—in Spanish, as I have taught you. *Nuestro padre—*"

The sleepy voice spoke haltingly the unfamiliar words, the man prompting from time to time. When the prayer was finished he rose and, with the boy in his arms, stooped over Mrs. Ganby that she might kiss her son good night. Then he passed around the table to Roberta's chair. "Innocence and helplessness," Roberta heard him murmur. "Who could not love it!" He stooped over her and lowered the boy until the childish lips brushed her cheek; then he bore the lad off to bed.

The two women exchanged glances, the mother's eyes were moist. "That is the Latin in him, Miss Antrim. He's not ashamed to demonstrate his affection. What a pity he hasn't a son of his own to waste the thrills of his big boy's heart on!"

Roberta did not answer. She was thinking of a remark that Crooked Bill had once made in her presence. "When children and dogs love a man a woman is usually safe with him." She wondered now if Glenn Hackett loved children and dogs and decided presently that he would love his own children, if and when he had them, but that he would not be interested in dogs or human beings beneath him in the social scale. And she thought of Julio Ortiz, with a bullet through his belly, dying in a Border foray for Don Jaime Miguel

Higuenes, filled with pride in his sacrifice, solaced at the last by that perfect touch of democracy which had decreed he should perish in his master's arms.

"He is a strange man, Mrs. Ganby," she said at last. "I have never met his kind before. I do not know what to make of him—whether to like him or dislike him, to fear him or to trust him. He killed my uncle and then, masquerading under the name of Jim Higgins he induced me to accept the hospitality of Jaime Higuenes. Where I come from one doesn't do that sort of thing, you know."

"Don Jaime is a free soul. He does as he pleases."

"How long have you known him, Mrs. Ganby?"

"Since three days after he killed your uncle. I am a trained nurse and I came down here to tend his wounds, although he would have recovered without my aid, for he is as healthy as a horse. Later he asked me to be his housekeeper, but since he does not appear to regard me as a servant, I imagine I am a sort of paid hostess. I think he had a hope that you might visit the ranch some day, and of course you would never have been invited unless he had a duenna here. He is very punctilious in matters of social propriety."

"And Robbie?"

"When he discovered I had a little crippled son he sent his general manager to El Paso to bring the boy here. He knew I'd want him with me, of course."

"I understand. Innocence and helplessness. Of course his heart went out to Robbie."

"Children understand, Miss Antrim. I think Don Jaime is a man who likes a fight—any kind of a fight. He is tremendously interested in that atrophied leg of Robbie's. Lately he has started massaging it, stretching it, studying it. He has been sending for medical treatises on infantile paralysis and talks of sending Robbie East to be treated at the Rockefeller Institute."

"Apparently he has a mania for making people happy."

"He says money is round and made to roll. By the way, when you are leaving, do not attempt to pay him for the telegrams you telephone in to Los Algodones from time to time. He would regard that as splitting the hairs of his hospitality, as it were. He likes his guests to feel perfectly at home. If they want something they are supposed to ask for it; if he hasn't got it he'll send for it. And whatever you do, don't try to tip the servants. They wouldn't accept it and wouldn't understand it, because Don Jaime pays them well."

Further confidences were interrupted by the return of the host. He called something in Spanish to the singers and presently one came and handed him her guitar, received the thanks of her audience and departed covered with embarrassment.

"Now, then," quoth Don Jaime, "we'll have a little old Anglo-Saxon minstrelsy from the boss himself." He smote the strings with a firm, assured hand and in a perfectly thunderous basso began "The Yellow Rose of Texas." To his great delight Roberta joined in the

song. He cocked one lazy eye at her inquiringly; at a half-rest in the music he demanded:

"How come?"

"Uncle Bill," she replied, and he nodded comprehension. Yes, of course Uncle Bill would know that one. But Don Jaime played now while Roberta sang; he drew Robbie's vacant chair toward him with one great foot, swung his legs up onto it and settled back for a good old evening of music. His ancient houseman or bartender or alleged butler or majordomo or whatever he was, slithered out in his heelless slippers, snipped the end off a cigar, thrust it in Don Jaime's mouth and lighted it before serving the liqueurs. Roberta saw the strong fine white teeth clamp down on it and tilt it at an angle, saw his eyes close, saw ten thousand lazy, fun-loving Spanish ancestors concentrated in her host, erasing the Irish in him as a schoolboy rubs clean a slate.

"My mocking-birds will be jealous," he declared.

Roberta started. *That* was the Celtic blarney in him —the God-given art of making a pretty speech to a woman without straining, without being obvious, conveying sincerity, approval and praise to the nth degree. A trick of foreshortening ideas! A trick no Spaniard ever had, since Spaniards are slaves to custom and precedent and the Irish establish their own as necessity arises. Thereupon the shades of the ten thousand Spanish ancestors vanished, and in their place came ten thousand leprechauns keening of the little green isle

of poetry and romance, of loving and fighting, of warriors and troubadours, of potheen-brewers and poachers.

The song ended and Don Jaime looked up, a fleeting gleam of sadness, of resignation in the lazy eyes. "For a moment I had forgotten I had killed your Uncle Tom!" he murmured.

"Oh, please, Mr. Higuenes—"

"Oh, please, Jaime," he corrected.

"I had forgotten, too, Jaime."

"Now that you have made up your mind not to dislike me or the task of trying to like me, I have a confession to make."

"I'll try to bear up under it."

"A few days after I shot it out with your uncle, his man, Bill Dingle and five others came over here with the intention of doing me great bodily harm—lynching me to one of the cross-pieces in that heavy trellis in the grape arbor yonder, as a matter of fact. I captured Dingle and his idiots and confined them in my private bastile here for thirty days. Before turning them loose I had my foreman flog them all."

"Oh, Jaime!"

"That's the sort of bad egg I am, señorita. That's why I was wearing two guns today. By the way, can you sing Gounod's Ave Maria?"

"Why, yes!" she answered a little breathlessly.

"Oh, grand, wonderful! Let's go inside and practice it with a piano accompaniment. I want you to sing it

at mass tomorrow for my people. You will, of course. I know you will. Poor devils. They'll love it so! But first send your telegrams. The office in Los Algodones will soon be closing."

CHAPTER XV

MR. WILLIAM B. LATHAM smiled fatuously and rubbed his old hands together in pleased anticipation, as he noticed the telegram beside his plate at breakfast. As he had anticipated, it was from his niece. He read:

THE MAN WHO FIRST CALLED YOU CROOKED BILL KNEW HIS ONIONS STOP YOU ARE AS CROOKED AS A BED SPRING VINTAGE OF EIGHTEEN EIGHTY STOP I HAVE YOUR TEXAS RECORD STOP YOU PERMITTED ME TO WALK INTO A SITUATION THAT IS PERFECTLY AND MONSTROUSLY UNUSUAL AND I AM HORRIBLY EMBARRASSED STOP JIM'S FATHER SHOT YOU IN THE FOOT WITH A FORTY-FIVE CALIBER REVOLVER AND THE IMPULSE TO BE CARELESS WITH DEADLY WEAPONS STILL RUNS IN THE FAMILY ONLY THE PRESENT REPRESENTATIVE USES A BOW AND ARROW AND SHOOTS FOR THE HEART STOP NOR IS THE CONNEMARA HALF BLOOD BRED OUT OF THE TRIBE STOP BELIEVE IT OR NOT HE HAS ERECTED A HEADSTONE OVER UNCLE TOM STOP IT IS AN ANGEL WEEPING AND ON THE BASE OF THE MONUMENT HE HAS WORKED IN A BAS-RELIEF OF

A SHEPHERD AND A SHEEP PRESUMABLY THE ONE THAT WAS LOST STOP SPANISH ART AND IRISH DEVILTRY STOP WHEN I COMPARE HIM WITH GLENN I AM TORN BETWEEN A DESIRE TO WEEP AND TO LAUGH STOP GLENN IS SO RESPECTABLE SO PROPER SO MINDFUL OF ALL THE THINGS WE HAVE BEEN RAISED TO ADMIRE AND RESPECT WHILE THIS FELLOW STOPS AT NOTHING AND CONSULTS ONLY HIS OWN DESIRES STOP MY PLAN IS TO SECURE THE COURT'S PERMISSION TO GET RID OF THE SHEEP PROMPTLY AND RETURN TO HILLCREST SO I CAN BITE YOU ON THE EAR

BOBBY

Harms, the butler, in the act of dropping the customary two lumps of sugar into Crooked Bill's coffee-cup, froze in the act and regarded his master with amazement and concern. It appeared to Harms that the old gentleman was about to have some sort of seizure, for he had closed his eyes, thrown back his head, opened his mouth and gasped.

"Anything wrong, sir?" Harms demanded.

"Har!" yelled Crooked Bill. "Har!" Two bursts of maniac laughter! The channels of his devious sense of humor having thus been cleared, Crooked Bill laid his head down on the table and gasped and shook and wept and roared. Harms thought his levity undignified, disgusting and impolite, since it exceeded all reasonable bounds. Even after the cacophonous tide had receded,

Crooked Bill continued to indulge himself for another minute in what he was wont to allude to in his primitive way as "little belly chuckles."

"Good news, sir?" Harms suggested politely.

"Harms," said Crooked Bill, "did you ever hear of Pandora?"

"Oh, yes, sir! You are referring to the lady of mythology who unlocked the box of troubles?"

"Exactly. Well, Miss Roberta has unlocked a similar box. Harms, get Mr. Hackett on the telephone."

He read Hackett Roberta's message and waited for a hearty laugh. It did not come. "Dog your cats, Glenn," he protested, "where's your sense of humor?"

"I see no humor in the situation, Mr. Latham. I can only sympathize with Roberta. There she is, the guest of the man who killed her uncle, and who has had the hardihood to make a jest at the expense of his victim. Not satisfied with that exhibition of bad taste he has, apparently, commenced to pay his court to Roberta immediately, which is most embarrassing and distressing to her. She will be forced to leave his house, of course, and decline to permit him to continue to serve her in the matter of conserving those damnable sheep."

"You tarnation monkey, you. Isn't that exactly what I planned should happen? The situation works out to make you shine by contrast. In the reflected light from this rascal Higuenes, who would probably be a knockout with a Texas country girl but a washout with Roberta, you loom up like a lighthouse in a fog. Roberta

practically admits it already. She's anxious to clean up on those sheep and return—and when she does, boy, you'll certainly look good to her."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"I wish I could be as confident as you, Mr. Latham. Roberta has one weakness, and that is her sense of humor. Like yours, it's a bit—er—diabolical."

"Nonsense. Why, don't you see she's as mad as hops at me? She knows blamed well now that I knew who Higuenes was, or at least that in all probability I suspected that he and Jim Higgins might be one and the same person. This Don Jaime was only about three years old when I left Texas and I took a chance that I was forgotten there by now and that he had never heard of me, or, hearing of me, would not recognize me as his father's old friend."

"Who shot you in the heel, eh? A peculiar friend, I should say."

"Served me right. I insulted him. And it's only the mercy of God I didn't blow his brains out. Accidents like that will happen, even between friends, you know. To err is human, to forgive divine, my boy. Remember that."

"I wish I had never joined in this conspiracy with you, Mr. Latham."

"Faint heart never won fair lady. My boy, don't you realize you have a chance to be a hero?"

"I do not."

"You're singularly dull. General Motors is still climbing and you need more money to protect me. So you've decided that those sheep should be sold to get ready cash. Consequently you've had two important cases continued, which will enable you to go to Texas and arrange the sale of the sheep."

"Who will I sell them to?"

"To me, fool, to me. I'll give you more money for them than anybody else, and the more money you realize on them the stronger you'll be with Roberta! Also, you'll arrive on the job in time to put a crimp in the sentimental aspirations of Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes. Absence makes the heart grow fonder and comparisons are odious, my boy. Higuenes, of course, will be jealous as the devil, for Roberta will be unable to resist harpooning him with you on hand to make good her bluff. His Spanish blood will immediately incite him to do things you'd never dream of doing and then, maybe, you'll have another chance to be a hero."

"He might shoot me, Mr. Latham?"

"He might, indeed, but if he should, that would be entirely your fault. If he's at all like his late father he'll fight you with any weapon you name, from shillalahs to guillotines, and fight you fairly. You were no mean light heavyweight boxer in college and you've kept yourself in condition. Why, boy, you could make a monkey out of Higuenes—and in defense of Roberta—wow! After that, all you'd have to do would be to get her to name the day."

"But how can I be assured that he will be jealous of me?"

"He can't help it. It's in his nature. I know the breed. And you know Roberta. Right now she's busy working on him. She'll make him fall in love with her and then, when she has him helpless, she'll put her foot in his face. The man who makes love to Roberta is a gone *hombre,* but the smart fellow who refuses to take her seriously is the chap who's bound to win her. And, once won, she'll make the finest and most loyal wife in the world."

Glenn Hackett pondered. "There may be something in what you say, Mr. Latham. Higuenes wrote her that a chap named Jim Higgins had killed her Uncle Tom, and, having sold her that information, he has had the audacity to invite her to his ranch. That was poor strategy and I think, with you, that Roberta will punish him for it."

"In her own little way, my boy, in her own little way—and you know what that way is. You'd better jump to Texas *muy pronto.*"

"Well, in order to make good on your deceit you've rented Hillcrest, so why not go to Texas with me? Shave your whiskers and dress like a rancher and play the part of the sheep buyer?"

"By golly, I'll do it, Glenn. It's a good idea. Anyhow I should be on the ground to advise you in case you run into snags. When can you start?"

"In one week."

"Fine. That's giving Bobby more time than she requires, but on the other hand Higuenes may be a slow starter. Meanwhile I'll keep you advised if anything new turns up— Hey, don't hang up yet. Harms has just handed me another telegram . . . it may be from Bobby. . . . No, it's from Higuenes. Oh, Lord, oh, Lord, oh, Lord! Glenn, will you listen to this?" And he read over the telephone:

WHEN YOU SEE YOUR WARD AGAIN I SHOULD BE A PROUD MAN TO HEAR YOU ADDRESS HER AS MRS. HIGUENES OR HIGGINS WHICHEVER SUITS YOU BEST STOP TO THAT END I REQUEST YOUR PERMISSION TO PAY MY COURT STOP I KNOW THE GOING WILL BE HARD BUT I HAVE NEVER BEEN ACCUSTOMED TO GETTING ANYWHERE WITHOUT A BATTLE SO I WILL TAKE A CHANCE STOP YOU KNOW MY PEOPLE SO I DO NOT HAVE TO FURNISH SOCIAL REFERENCES STOP CAN FURNISH FINANCIAL CREDENTIALS TO PLEASE ANY SAVE MOST EXACTING

"He's a direct-actionist," Glenn Hackett growled.

"He's his father's son. Just imagine the nice courtesy that induced him to seek the permission of Bobby's responsible relative before commencing work. Why, the old-fashioned son of a gun! Well, that's his Castilian raising, Glenn. The word of the old folks is law to the Spanish cavalier."

"What are you going to say in reply, Mr. Latham?"

"I'm going to encourage the boy, of course."

"Why do that?"

"To make him work. Glenn, if I could only have motion pictures of Don Jaime playing the bear under Roberta's window—keeping her awake with his guitar and his sad Spanish songs, putting an extra dash of perfume on himself and drowning her in silly romance, I'd die happy. Oh, the poor, unfortunate devil!"

"No sense of repression, eh?"

"Not a scintilla," Crooked Bill assured him. "That method of courtship works fine with a Spanish girl, but to a modern American girl like Roberta it's just hogwash—nerve-racking and effeminate. Remember, Glenn, there is one thing Roberta will never forgive, and that's bad taste. You can't kill a girl's uncle and then expect to rush her off her feet, even though you killed in self-defense and in so doing performed a public service. I tell you this man Higuenes doesn't know any better than to walk into straight lefts and rights. Imagine Roberta the mistress of a ranch on the Rio Grande trying to teach a *cholo* butler to deal the grub from the left."

Evidently Glenn Hackett promptly imagined it, for he laughed briefly for the first time. "But this chap appears to be educated and, to a considerable degree, Americanized," he warned, as an afterthought.

"So was his old man. Texas has been under six flags and the tribe of Higuenes has fought under them all.

Outwardly they're plain, ordinary Americans, and no Yankee can take them into camp, but inwardly, I tell you, they're still Spaniards. They prefer their beef jerked and they're strong on red chilli peppers and brown beans. Spanish is their mother tongue. They speak English perfectly but think in Spanish. Why, if old Mike Higuenes could have unloaded his ranch during the Spanish-American War he'd have emigrated to Mexico. He declared that war was an outrage against civilization."

"As a matter of fact I think he was right, Mr. Latham. Well, let me hear from you if anything new or interesting occurs."

Crooked Bill hung up and immediately dispatched the following telegram to Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes:

YOU HAVE THE NERVE OF A LION-TAMER STOP THANKS FOR THE COMPLIMENT IMPLIED IN YOUR TELEGRAM BUT I HAVE NOTHING TO SAY ABOUT IT STOP HOWEVER YOU HAVE MY BEST WISHES AND I WILL EVEN GIVE YOU SOME GOOD ADVICE STOP PILE ON THE HIGH ROMANCE AND SOUND THE OLD CASTILIAN NOTE YOUR GOOD OLD FATHER KNEW SO WELL STOP IF THERE IS ANYTHING IN MENDEL'S LAW YOU SHOULD BE DARK-HAIRED AND DARK-EYED LIKE MIKE AND WITH THESE ASSETS A FAIR SINGING VOICE AND A GUITAR SOME MOONLIGHT AND A PACHYDERMOUS HIDE I SHOULD SAY THAT YOU STAND SLIGHTLY MORE CHANCE THAN A CEL-

LULOID DOG CHASING AN ASBESTOS CAT THROUGH THE INFERNAL REGIONS

LATHAM

"And now," he murmured, "having done my full Christian duty by all concerned, I think I should return to my breakfast."

Well had he been nicknamed Crooked Bill!

CHAPTER XVI

MIGNON awakened Roberta at seven o'clock next morning. As her mistress's tub was filling the maid announced, somewhat grimly, that somebody had turned her out at six-thirty, which hour Mignon regarded as unseasonable and unreasonable. She complained that she had eaten dinner the preceding night in the servants' dining-room with persons to whose general color-scheme and table manners she was not accustomed.

"They might, with equal justice, find the same fault with you, Mignon," Roberta chid her. "No more grousing, if you please. We are in the Far West where men are men and women rope steers and bust wild horses. What did you have for dinner?"

Mignon recited the menu. "You ate precisely the same food that I had. Did the others have it too?"

"Good heavens, no, Miss Roberta! They had brown beans, baked chilli peppers, steak, black coffee and a sort of thin tough pancake."

"It must be good food. Don Jaime told me last night that he had practically been raised on a string of chilli peppers and pictures of the saints."

"I think he's wonderful," said Mignon with finality.

"And I'm sure he'd make much more money in pictures than down here on this lonely ranch."

"I do not think I should like Don Jaime in pictures, Mignon."

"I'd adore him. Wasn't he wonderful on his horse, shooting at that ugly Mr. Dingle?"

"I fear," said Roberta, slipping down out of the huge high bed, "that you have a romantic strain in you, Mignon. Also that you're a bit bloodthirsty. Still," she added, "why shouldn't you? You were christened Maggie Donovan, I believe. No, no, never mind entering an objection. I like you, Mignon, because you're such a failure as a French maid."

"It's Sunday," Mignon reminded her discreetly. "What will you wear, miss?"

Roberta had given considerable thought to that very subject the night previous. "That sports suit I bought just before leaving New York," she answered promptly.

"You'll knock him dead with that," Mignon assured her.

It occurred to Roberta that it is a very difficult task for one woman to conceal her innermost thoughts from another. She eyed Mignon speculatively, and the maid, observing the challenge, tossed her head and declared that knocking him dead today would be an easy task, seeing that he was already wobbling on the two legs of him.

"Now, what makes you say that?" Roberta demanded, torn between a desire to reprove Mignon for

her familiarity and a yearning to satisfy her feminine curiosity.

"Well, why shouldn't he be? They all do," Mignon retorted, thus wriggling gracefully out of the dilemma her agile tongue had gotten her into.

"Oh! Well, lay out my clothes, Mignon."

"How long will we be in this God-forsaken place, Miss Roberta?"

"I don't know—and I don't care. I find it a pleasant spot."

"He isn't one to give himself away too quick," Mignon ruminated.

"Mignon!"

"I never saw one of the others that had an ounce of restraint. No wonder you grow tired of them, Miss Roberta—always under your feet like a litter of puppy dogs. Now, the master here is a seasoned young dog—a bit of a mastiff in his way, I'd say; and for all that he's Spanish I'd not bank too much on the pedigree of that lad. I know his kind. He's the spittin' image of McNamara, the motor cop that hangs out at the gas station at Dobbs Ferry—"

"And whose motorcycle I have seen so frequently at the back door at Hillcrest."

The bathroom door closed behind Roberta, and Mignon, formerly Maggie Donovan, pursed her long upper lip reflectively.

"I wonder if that one has a heart in her chest—I mean for men," she soliloquized. "But then," she added,

"what does she know about men? Men like McNamara, I mean. I'd give a hundred dollars to see this cool young don gentleman bring her fluttering into his hand. Someone has got to do it sooner or later and someone will, but it'll never be that long-nosed Yankee, Hackett. That lad's so solemn and conservative, if he'd ever forget himself long enough to give three hoots in a hollow, he'd want one of them back and be ashamed of the other two."

She sighed—the long, ecstatic sigh of those who have vision and profound understanding without in the least knowing why, and proceeded to lay out her mistress's wardrobe. She had a feeling, probably not unakin to that which animated Alice in Wonderland, and something occult in her whispered that extraordinary events were bound to come out of it.

Breakfast was ready on the gallery when Roberta came out looking for her host. The table was set for two and Don Jaime was waiting for her. He rose and bowed with that easy, graceful, natural old-world courtliness that seemed so alien to him the moment he opened his mouth to speak. His lazy dark eyes swept her in one glance—from her white kid pumps to her Titian head.

"You are as beautiful as an army with banners, Miss Antrim," he announced in the matter-of-fact tone in which one proclaims that two and two make four or that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points. Not so much a compliment or the natural desire of a man to flatter a woman, as a definite state-

ment of fact. Nor did he look to see whether his statement pleased her or otherwise; he was drawing out her chair, in fact, and wondering if she had seen what he now saw, to wit—a fly in the cream jug!

Roberta flushed—and hated herself for it, because it was not her habit to exhibit such apparent pleasure at compliments from men. She was so accustomed to them she had developed the habit of discounting them about eighty per cent and paying scant attention to the remaining twenty. Had the words come from any other man she would have had a careless retort; in all probability she would have told another man that he wasn't looking so very beautiful himself. But again that strange sense of bafflement, of stupidity, almost, held her speechless—speechless and blushing like—well, like Mignon, when McNamara, the cop, called at Hillcrest.

"I suppose he'll ask me if I slept well," she decided. "The usual banal query."

He did not. He tucked her into her seat, sat down opposite, looked at her casually and said: "I see you had a good night's rest in the gigantic bed of my ancestors. You appear much refreshed and I am very glad of it. And you arrive for breakfast promptly at eight. Punctuality is a paramount virtue, particularly in women, so just for that you win a rose." And he leaned back and plucked one from the vine that clambered around a pillar of the gallery. "You're too red for red roses," he rambled on, handing it to her, "so this lovely mauve rose is just the right shade."

"I'm not red. I'm auburn. Thanks for the rose, however. It's lovely."

"Well, whatever it is, it suits me fine." An order in Spanish and the cream jug disappeared, clutched in the dusky hand of the serving maid.

"How does one say in Spanish, *'Heraus mit* the cream jug; there's a fly in it'?" Roberta queried innocently.

Instantly his guard was down. With all the eagerness and insouciance of a brittle boy he said: "You and I are going to be the best of friends, Roberta."

"Well, I like them fast on their feet—and you're a whiz-bang, Jimmy. I've been trying very hard to dislike you but I must confide it's an up-hill job."

"Of course, it's very unethical to like me," he admitted demurely.

"Let us say it is unusual and let it go at that."

His eyes devoured her. "Roberta, you're mighty sweet. I think, if I may, I'll call you Bobby."

"My friends all do, Shamus. Fire away, old-timer."

She saw him swallow something—and it was not food. Then she observed his guard come up, as it were. The fire died out of his eyes, and the sudden, wistful, little-boy look faded and was replaced by gravity, sternness, masculinity. "He's nice," the girl thought. "He wouldn't take advantage of the fact that I'm his guest to appear to rush me."

Oh yes, Roberta knew men. She could read their

faces and, conversely, their minds. For had not Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes just assured her she was as beautiful as an army with banners!

"An army with banners *is* beautiful, you know," he popped out at her.

A plague on the man! Of a sudden Roberta was almost afraid of him. He was too smart, too much of a mental mystic.

"Of course, you've been in the army," she suggested.

He nodded.

"So naturally you'd know."

"I have never seen an army with banners, Bobby. I was with the Border Guard during the war, until the German yeast began to rise in Mexico. Never saw more than a regiment and then the banners were cased. Later I was detailed to double for a Mexican and go down to see what it was all about. As I have numerous anti-American relatives in Mexico City, I found out. So I teamed up with an English Intelligence officer and together we wrecked a German radio station and plugged the leak."

"Get plugged yourself, by any chance?"

"Just a little bit. I was careless. Forgot I was a Mexican *peon* and cussed out loud in good old Anglo-Saxon, so I lost face with my relatives and spent the remainder of the war in a most unpleasant jail. They wanted to shoot me but were a little afraid of international complications. . . . I had no passport, so they used that as an excuse to hold me over as an undesir-

able alien. When the armistice was signed I was sent by train to El Paso."

"Were you decorated for your good work, Jimmy?"

He shook his head.

"You should have received the Distinguished Service Medal." She pondered a moment. "Uncle Bill knows everybody in Washington, Jimmy, and I'm going to have him take up your case and see to it that you are rewarded, even at this late date."

"Pray do not bother. I was decorated—after a fashion. A *teniente* of *rurales* marched me to the Juarez side of the International Bridge and headed me across with a good swift kick."

"You priceless wretch!"

"And if you start a drive to get me the D. S. M. you'll only involve me in trouble. I was supposed to be dead, and as the war was over when I returned I didn't bother to go back to my old command for an honorable discharge and my back pay. I just beat it for home to see what kind of a calf crop we'd had at Valle Verde while I was in jail in Mexico City."

"Jimmy Higgins, you absolutely slay me!"

He chuckled. "But I got even with that *teniente* of *rurales,*" he continued. "Last year I took another illegal trip into Mexico. About eight hundred head of my cattle had been driven across the Border in a bandit raid, so I took a couple of dozen of my boys and went down there to bring them back. We got them without very much trouble, but on our way back who should we

bump into but the *teniente* and twenty-five *rurales?* Now I have great respect for the *rurales* but none at all for the Mexican army. If I'd met the army we would have charged them with pistols, but—well, I didn't want any fuss with *rurales,* particularly when I was outnumbered two to one. So I was peaceable when that *teniente,* seeing the cattle were headed across the river from home, demanded my authority for moving them out of Mexico. I was stumped for a minute, but finally I dug up an old poll-tax receipt. He read it upside down, was too proud to admit he couldn't read Spanish any better than he could English, looked fierce and finally handed the silly document back to me with a courteous: *'Bueno, señor.'* You understand, I'd fattened up so much since he'd kicked me that I looked like another man. So we got home with the cows safely and I had the laugh on him."

"But how about our own customs guard along the river? Didn't they stop you?"

"Well, of course, one is not supposed to import Mexican cattle without a health certificate, and it is customary to pay an import duty. But when I thought of all the back pay I had never collected from my country I didn't feel so badly at beating the duty. So I had my riding boss start some lively shooting a few miles down the river from where we were waiting to cross at dusk, and the local customs guard hastened in that direction to see what the fuss was about. Then we crossed."

"I know you now," Roberta assured him. "You are neither Spanish nor Irish, but plain crooked American."

"The influence of environment on species, Bobby. Darwin explains it."

"You're a very happy man, aren't you, Jimmy?"

"Not always."

"But you have so many jolly adventures, so many interesting experiences. It seems to me that with you, life must be one glad sweet song."

"Oh, it is," he assured her. "The singing started last night." Again his eyes burned into hers for a split second, and again she felt her face flushing hotly. To cover her confusion she said inanely: "I do wish you knew my Uncle Bill."

"Not interested in the old reprobate, although if he should take a notion to show up at Valle Verde I wouldn't sick the dogs on him. Have some bacon and eggs. I cured that bacon myself and am personally acquainted with the hens that laid the eggs."

Had he noticed her confusion, and was this gay, frivolous banter merely his kind way of helping her cover it? Roberta had an idea it was. His two setters slouched apologetically to the table and he appeared to forget Roberta, to become absorbed in the dogs, feeding them strips of bacon and little pieces of bread steeped in bacon grease, talking affectionately to them the while as if they were human. Roberta reminded herself that Don Jaime was the first young man who had ever

neglected her to curry favor with a pair of English setters, and was interested to discover that she did not resent his action.

"What are you going to do about Robbie?" she inquired presently.

"Oh, Robbie. Nothing very much wrong with him. I suspected the fix he was in and, in order to verify my suspicions, I had Mrs. Ganby bring him here. He's been kept in the house because his mother, despite the fact that she is a trained nurse, motherlike considered him too delicate to be allowed out very much. She had to make a living for the two of them, so necessarily she has been forced to neglect the boy. What Robbie needs is a whole lot of letting alone and some practical attention from a man.

"He requires sunlight and lots of it. Every day he lies out in the sunlight mother-naked. I gave it to him in small doses, so he wouldn't sunburn. Now he's tanned. One arm and one leg are affected but not very badly. The muscles are weak—atrophied. With increased general health he will gain strength and the desire to be more active. Nobody ever exercised without wasting energy, and those who have no energy to waste do not care to exercise. I'll build up those atrophied muscles slowly but surely. When Robbie has his growth he'll walk with a slight limp because one leg is going to be a trifle shorter than the other, but otherwise he'll make a hand. It's going to be lots of fun to make Robbie over."

"He adores you, Jimmy."

"Well, if children and dogs do not like a man that's a sign he had better begin to take stock of himself. I like Robbie. I like all children, even terrible children. I'm godfather to one hundred and eighty-seven and after mass this morning I'll take on the one hundred and eighty-eighth."

"Why are you so popular, Jimmy?"

"For two reasons. If I'm godfather to the child of one of my people then, while an Higuenes lives at Valle Verde, that child will always dwell under the mantle of the Higuenes philanthropy. He can't be fired off the ranch, if he's a male, and he'll get something in the way of a hope chest if he's a female. The second reason is that I always give twenty silver half-dollars to the mothers of all babies upon whose behalf I renounce the devil with all his works and pomps."

"Why the silver half-dollars?"

"That's a lot of money, while a ten-dollar bill is just a piece of paper."

"You strange man! Of course as a godfather you have to promise that if the parents neglect to give their child a religious upbringing you will attend to the matter."

"Haven't I built a little church and haven't I a *padre* on my payroll? Imported him from Mexico. The archbishop of this diocese doesn't know he exists, so the old boy's as free as air. I'm strong for freedom myself."

"Is that why you have never married? Or have you?"

"I haven't. When an Higuenes marries it takes. And I haven't married because you've been such a long time showing up at my ranch."

"Why, Jimmy!"

"I thought for a while I'd surely have to go to Hillcrest, Dobbs Ferry, Westchester County, New York, and point out to you the error of your way, but thanks to your Uncle Tom I was spared that expensive journey. Then, too, I probably wouldn't have showed to such good advantage in your country, because of the competition. I loathe competition. It makes me just a little bit jealous."

For the life of her Roberta couldn't help laughing. She had a habit of laughing at men when they were proposing to her or on the brink of it. She was at ease now, no longer inhibited by some quality in this man which she had never met in any other. If he was in love with her she had him foul—wherefore she laughed.

To her chagrin he laughed with her, and instantly a horrible suspicion crossed her mind. Was this Texas longhorn merely indulging in a mild flirtation with her? Was he merely telling her the complimentary things he thought she desired to hear? A hot rage swelled in Roberta's heart and her laughter ceased abruptly.

"This is very sudden, Jimmy." Her voice was cool.

"That habit of being sudden is a trait that runs in the Higuenes blood. My father was a very sudden man. When he made up his mind to marry my mother, he appeared at her father's house and said to the old man:

'I've come to marry your daughter. What have you got to say about it? Why, nothing at all! Here's the license and the priest's outside. Where's the bride?' "

"Well, if I had been the bride your respectable parent would have received the jolt of his career."

"Fiddlesticks!" Don Jaime retorted sharply. "A woman worth having is a woman worth stealing. My father always declared women seldom know what they want. They think they want a lot of romance, when what they're looking for is a husband who'll organize the show and run it with a firm hand."

"What do you know about women?"

"Something less than nothing. But I know a heap about men! I'd most certainly be the head of my house."

"So would I?"

"Not in my house, Bobby."

"Is this argument in the nature of a left-handed proposal?"

"Certainly not. The time isn't ripe for that, nor do I know that it will ever be ripe. I'm merely arguing a relative proposition—a sort of hypothetical question. By the way, may I photograph you after we return from church, and may I have a print? Just one, please. Then you may destroy the plate if you will?"

"I never give my photograph to gentlemen on such short acquaintance."

"That isn't answering my question."

"No."

"Then I'll have to get along with the one I have. It isn't so good but it will do."

"Where did you possess yourself of my photograph?"

"It's a rotogravure and I got it out of a magazine. It's the one where you're jumping a light hunter over a low fence. By the way, I don't think much of your horse. He's ewe-necked, too long in the barrel and too narrow, too long-legged to carry weight. Now if you give me a new photo of yourself, I'll give you a horse that's a horse. What's more, he can jump six feet six inches—a thoroughbred crossed on an Irish hunter."

"You keep your horse and I'll give you the photograph, Jimmy. I had some taken just before I left and I'll send for one."

"Thank you, but I also want you just as you are this morning. I want you standing in that doorway. Then, after you go away, I can look at it and think how fine it would have been if you had stayed—there in your own doorway looking out at me. Perhaps I may be able to fool myself into fancying you standing there watching for me to come home."

"Not that, Jimmy. Think of me standing there awaiting the arrival of one of your men with the information that the rest of the boys will be here with the body directly."

"Have another egg and some more bacon," Don Jaime urged hospitably. "We're talking too much and there goes the first bell for mass."

CHAPTER XVII

THE bell in the cupola of Don Jaime's little adobe church was calling its last summons to the faithful when Roberta and her host left the house on foot. The street of the pueblo was deserted, save for some seminaked babies and an unconscionable number of cur dogs, as they passed through. As Don Jaime's firm step sounded in the tiled entrance the congregation, which had been seated on benches, rose en masse—and since the *padre* had not as yet appeared on the altar, Roberta realized that here was a gesture of profound respect to the lord of the rancho.

Don Jaime led her down the main aisle and crossed with her over to the organ which stood against the wall. The choir sat on benches in the rear of the organ and an upholstered chair stood beside the organ seat.

"For company," Don Jaime murmured, and indicated that Roberta should occupy it. Then he sat in at the organ, pulled out the stops and tried the pedals. Finding some difficulty he stood erect and peered back of the organ. And now Roberta realized why her host kept a short buggy whip on top of the instrument, for he seized it and administered a smart tap to something hidden from her gaze.

"*Si,* Don Jaime, *si,*" a voice cried anxiously.

"The trouble with my people," Don Jaime whispered, "is that if permitted to lean against anything they fall asleep. My organ-pumper is no exception."

The *padre,* in his vestments, entered from the sacristy, and as he advanced to the altar Don Jaime's little organ crashed into a sonorous prelude; then his brown choir, taking the cue from a vigorous nod of the master's raven head, sang:

"Come, Holy Ghost, Creator blest,
And in our hearts take up thy rest."

The girl watched Don Jaime, who knew not one note from another but who played amazingly well by ear because God had created him a troubadour. His dark face was alight with the delight he gleaned from his simple task; for all his huge body, there was in his attitude and in the luster of his eyes something that proclaimed to her again the odd, little-boy quality in him, touching her as she had never been touched before. She gazed about her. Dusky fat women, in bright print calico dresses and gay shawls, men in overalls and clean gingham shirts, sans neckties, their sombreros on the floor beside them; little barefoot boys and girls, their black eyes bent upon Roberta with frank, primitive curiosity, knelt on the hard red tiles.

His people! Never before had she met a man who claimed as his people those with whom he could not

claim a blood relationship. Never before had she met a man whose clannish instincts, whose reverence for the traditions of his ancestors, were so strong as in Don Jaime. A part of the man dwelt in the remote past, content with the riches of simplicity and health, contemptuous of money for money's sake, scornful of its power—a sort of spiritual worldling chained to his environment by the obligations it thrust upon him, yet not wishful to avoid or decrease them—rather relishing them, in fact.

"Strange, strange man," the girl reflected. "There he sits with a look of exaltation on his face, and yet I know he prides himself on being too stern and original a thinker to be an orthodox churchman, to accept the Scriptures as literal, to have even the most remote interest in the ultimate disposal of his immortal soul. He killed my Uncle Tom and is too honest to think of pretending to me that he regrets it. This morning he said he loved me—yet he has not made love to me nor will he. I wonder if that was just some of his Irish blarney or his Castilian instinct for conveying compliments for their own sake. He's a strange mixture, yet there is nothing complex about him. He thinks straight, talks straight, and acts straight. He couldn't dissemble if he wanted to. Oh, dear, I'm afraid I wish I had never met him. He's one of those terrible men one must take seriously."

The service proceeded. Roberta dreamed on. . . . Don Jaime's low voice reached her. "Now, then, Bobby, do your stuff."

She sang as she had never sung before. "See their eyes," Don Jaime whispered as she sat down. "The poor devils. They loved it. Handel's 'Where'er You Walk' isn't sung in our church, but who here knows the difference, and who cares? An encore, Bobby."

She sang it. Then she sat through a sermon in Spanish, at the conclusion of which the *padre,* addressing Don Jaime, begged him to convey his thanks and that of his *pobrecitos* to the American señorita. Don Jaime translated his message, and a few minutes later she saw him stooping over the lap of a girl and lifting therefrom an infant. He carried it over to Roberta. "My soon-to-be godson," he explained. "Little brown rascal. He's as fat as a woodchuck, and when he grows up he will be unenergetic, if not downright lazy. Well, to the baptismal fount with him. Here comes the *padre.*"

She watched him holding the stolid infant while the sacrament of baptism was administered; she marked the pride and pleasure in the young mother's face at this signal honor conferred upon her and hers, when, the ceremony over, Don Jaime kissed the infant and handed the mother the customary largess. To the godmother, too, he made a gift of money; then, with a paternal pat on the shoulders of all concerned, including the *padre,* he rejoined Roberta and together they walked back through the pueblo to the hacienda. En route women curtsied to them, men removed their hats and bowed, soft voices murmured, *"Buenos días,* Don Jaime," cur dogs sniffed his heels and grimy little hands were thrust into his.

At the head of the single street Don Jaime looked back. "A contented people," he declared. "Chilli peppers drying on every roof and ample corn for the *tortillas;* a tiny garden for onions and lettuce and beans, labor exchanged for bright calico and overalls and gingham at cost at the ranch commissary; no debts, no rents, no lawsuits, freedom from a puritanical code of morals. Nothing to annoy them save a little labor for the man who exploits them and pays them starvation wages and who, when they are naughty, whips them. Sometimes I could wish I, too, were a *peon.* Boll-weevil and the price of beef bothers them not, nor taxes nor notes at the bank."

"Nor sheep," Roberta supplemented.

"Speaking of which," he continued, "we will ride out and visit the woollies after luncheon, if you care for a ride. We've kept holy the Sabbath forenoon so let us enjoy the Sabbath afternoon."

CHAPTER XVIII

CROOKED BILL was in a singularly happy frame of mind. The bottom had dropped out of General Motors, his line of United Drug stock had, as he anticipated, developed a strong tendency upward, he was convinced that matters were going to suit him in Texas, and he had just wrapped himself around a noggin of his favorite stimulant and was wondering why his niece was such a poor correspondent, when Harms, the butler, entered with the mail.

Crooked Bill pounced upon it. Two envelops, one slim and the other fat, bore the return address of the Rancho Valle Verde, so Crooked Bill opened the slim one and read:

My dear Mr. Latham:

I wired you for permission to pay my court to your very lovely niece, Miss Roberta Antrim. In granting the desired permission, for which I am deeply grateful, you saw fit to give me some wholly unnecessary and rather silly advice on how to be successful in love.

My father, in his callow youth, may have been steeped in the Castilian code of courtship. He had more Spanish blood in his veins than his son.

But I am no such bungling operator in the arena of courtship. I'll have you know that I'm a real live nephew of your own Uncle Sam, because I judge from your telegram that you think I'm as sentimental and romantic as a Neapolitan street singer.

My dear Mr. Latham, you know nothing of your charming niece's disposition. The finest way in the world for me to kill my feeble prospects would be for me to wangle a guitar under her window and sing *"Sobre las Olas."* And anyhow, what's your interest in me that causes you to be so free with your foolish advice? I suspect you would like to get me in Dutch.

I think she likes me, but she doesn't know whether I'm crazy about her or not, even when I swear I am. I figure that the best way to get her winging is to keep her guessing, but—*quién sabe!* If you have any other suggestions for helping along the game of your old friend Patricio Jesus Higuenes' son, let them fly.

Sincerely yours
J. M. HIGUENES.

Crooked Bill read and reread this remarkable document and with a huge sigh laid it aside. "I've overplayed my hand," he murmured, and took up Roberta's letter, which ran as follows:

Dear Uncle Bill:

I am ashamed of myself for having neglected you so, but the fact is I have been having such a

wonderful time at Don Jaime's ranch (I call him Jimmy) that I haven't had time to write.

Uncle Bill, he's marvelous. Everybody thinks so and says so—consequently it must be true. His lawyer, Don Prudencio Alviso, whom we visited yesterday, says God only made one Jaime Miguel Higuenes and then the mold was destroyed. He is very bold, he sings and plays divinely, he is a sort of feudal baron and he works hard all day with his men. He hasn't laid off a day since I came, but he lets me ride around with him. He has thousands of acres of cotton, thousands more of alfalfa, thousands more of cattle range, and all the cattle in the world. He still suffers a little from the wounds Uncle Tom inflicted on him but he will not admit this. He's very humorous and one never grows weary of his society. Mignon worships from afar and envies the *peon* women who kiss his hand after some kindness.

I haven't thought of Glenn Hackett more than twice since coming here and then only to compare him, to his disadvantage, to this amazing Jimmy. If he'd only make love to me like a reasonable man should I think I'd fall for him—hard.

I enclose a number of photos. The one of Jimmy is excellent. Write soon.

Your loving

Bobby.

With the calmness of despair Crooked Bill scrutinized the photographs. The one of Don Jaime showed

him on a gray horse with a day-old calf draped across his lap.

"*Caramba!*" murmured Crooked Bill. "This fellow is no fat, oily, perfumed, lazy Mexican with a mustache. Old Patricio had the soul of an Irishman but the body of a Mexican—wonderful but not very beautiful. But this boy's a throwback and as dangerous as they make 'em. What's more he's about ten times smarter than his father—and nobody ever accused old Patricio of being dull. The boy has sized Roberta up right—not the width of a gnat's wing out of line—and he'll win in a walk, as sure as death and taxes, unless I do something and do it *muy pronto*. I don't want Roberta to marry into a mixed breed like the Higueneses. They're fine in Texas but—well, what will I do, in my old age, if she marries him and lives down there? And Glenn Hackett is the man for her. He's got everything —and he's one of her own kind. I'm afraid of Latin blood.

"Well, Roberta says if he'd only make love to her like a reasonable man she'd fall for him hard. That means she's still safe. . . . Bill Latham, you're an ass —a cocksure old ass and you've got to get that girl back home in a hurry. She says nothing about sheep, which proves she is *not* interested in them—that her interests lie elsewhere. Those infernal sheep and my foolish scheming sent her to Texas, and in order to get her home those sheep must be disposed of—in a hurry. God help me, I'll have to buy them myself—and if that

Higuenes bandit ever gets on to the identity of the purchaser, he'll induce her to soak me so hard, when I'm unable to defend myself, that I'll never have the heart to eat a mutton chop again."

Long did Crooked Bill ponder. The question that gnawed at him even as the fox gnawed at the vitals of the Spartan youth was: whom could he get to buy the sheep for him and, after having secured them, to whom would he sell them? What would he do with them if they were not readily salable? Would he be forced to rent pasturage for them and hire herders to watch them? If so, he would have to hire watchers to watch the herders.

"Well," he sighed presently, "of one thing I'm certain. I'm in the sheep business right now and the sooner I get out of it the better for all concerned. Glenn, my boy, fighting your fight is going to be mighty expensive, but as an adjunct to the family I guess you're worth it." He telephoned to his office in New York, instructing it to secure him transportation and a drawing-room to Los Algodones, Texas, and the following day was en route to consummate the crookedest piece of business he had ever contemplated—that of swindling himself! He solaced himself, however, with the reflection that this was a luxury he could afford.

In due course he arrived in Los Algodones and put up at the Mansion House. Neither the town nor the hotel had changed a particle in the twenty-five years that had passed since he had seen it last. Indeed, the

only difference Crooked Bill was aware of was that twenty-five years ago Los Algodones and the Mansion House had pleased him thoroughly while today they caused him to shudder.

Nobody knew him, nor did any of the faces of the loungers in the chairs tipped back against the front of the hotel awaken in Crooked Bill the faintest flicker of recognition. At the general store he purchased a pair of overalls, a canvas coat and a gray sombrero, which, combined with a soft white shirt and black tie and the boots (a relic of other days) which he habitually wore, metamorphosed Crooked Bill into a very fair imitation of a Texas citizen of the wide open spaces. Thus garbed he called upon Don Prudencio Alviso.

"My name's Blodgett, Mr. Alviso," he announced, and soothed his conscience with the thought that it was —his middle name. "I understand you're the attorney for Tom Antrim's estate."

Don Prudencio, a stout and affable person of fifty, nodded gravely, and with large dark eyes, which showed a yellowish tinge in the whites of them, inquired of what interest the Tom Antrim estate might be to Mr. Blodgett.

"I remember this fellow just about the time he got his sheepskin," Crooked Bill soliloquized. "He's developed just about as I thought he would. Too confounded lazy to open his mouth and ask questions." To Don Prudencio's eyes he replied:

"I understand old Tom left quite a smear of sheep."

Don Prudencio nodded.

"Are they for sale?"

"A sale might be arranged, weeth the consent of the court, Señor Blodgett," Don Prudencio answered guardedly.

"Fine," said Crooked Bill. "I'll buy them. I've a notion I can make a turn on those sheep. I understand Antrim's heir lives in New York, so I presume she'll be glad to sell and get rid of a nuisance."

Don Prudencio shrugged. "Maybe so." With his eyes he inquired what Señor Blodgett's offer might be. Having looked up the market quotations in an El Paso paper and fortified himself with further knowledge of the market in a conversation with a sheepman he had drawn into conversation on the train coming down, Crooked Bill promptly named a figure one dollar per head above the highest market quotations.

Don Prudencio stirred slightly. "You have seen thees sheeps?"

"No, but I understand they're a good lot."

"I weel sell you those sheeps, subject to the confirmation by the court," Don Prudencio purred. "I am the executor for the ee-state. The sheeps have been count' recently and I weel guarantee the count. I weel write for you an offer for all those sheeps, wheech you will sign. Then I weel accept, subject to the confirmation by the court and you weel pay me now on account ten thousand dollars, no? I am queeck trader—like you."

"I'll have the money wired to the credit of the estate

in any bank you name. It will be there tomorrow. You've sold something."

Don Prudencio Alviso might have looked sleepy, but behind those slightly liverish eyes he was very wide awake. He knew there were a few thousand culls in that lot of sheep—old ewes with wrinkled necks, old ewes without teeth, old rams that were merely boarders, mixed breeds of uncertain sizes and ages. Consequently, when for both aged sheep and lambs he had received so cavalier and tempting an offer he did not hesitate. Within ten minutes he had William B. Latham sewed up on a contract of purchase and sale, and with this signal advantage. If, for any reason, it was considered undesirable for the estate to go through with the sale, it could get out of the contract, while for the purchaser there could be no escape, even though he should change his mind, provided the court approved Don Prudencio's action as executor.

When Crooked Bill had the contract safely tucked in his pocket he commenced talking with Don Prudencio about the deceased Tom Antrim, and learned that for a few days following Antrim's death the sheep had remained in charge of one Bill Dingle, Antrim's foreman. Later Dingle had been rather forcibly relieved of his charges by Jaime Higuenes, of the Rancho Valle Verde.

"That Dingle might be a good experienced sheepman to care for these sheep in case the court approves the sale," Crooked Bill suggested hopefully. "Where might one get in touch with him?"

Don Prudencio gave him minute directions for finding Mr. Dingle, and with a heart beating high with hope Crooked Bill took his departure.

"I'll sell the dod-gasted sheep to Dingle, and take a chattel mortgage on them if he hasn't got enough money to pay for them—and I dare say he hasn't," the old schemer decided. "Of course I'm bound to lose some money, but then I expected that, and thank God, I can pay for my fancies. Well, tomorrow I'll hire a car and driver and hie me out to saw those sheep off on Bill Dingle. I'll give that grass thief a bargain he just naturally won't have the heart to refuse. Then I'll get an airplane to freight me back home in a hurry, because I mustn't waste any time with that Higuenes bird always on the job. Once home, I'll wire Roberta I'm very ill and to come home immediately. After that—the Deluge."

CHAPTER XIX

FOR a long time after Crooked Bill had left his office Don Prudencio Alviso sat in his swivel chair and stared hard at the opposite wall. He was thinking equally hard. Presently he took down the telephone and called the proprietor of the Mansion House and with him held a conversation in Spanish. Then he hung up and waited. Presently the telephone rang and Don Prudencio answered, *"Gracias."* He hung up and wrote on a scratch pad the initials W. B. L. Thereafter he continued to stare at the wall for another hour. About sunset he shook his large black head in negation and defeat and went home.

The following night he appeared at the Rancho Valle Verde, having driven out in his disreputable flivver. Roberta was dressing for dinner, after a day in the saddle with Don Jaime and his men, and Don Jaime was lying in his long chair on the gallery, with Ken Hobart beside him.

"Hello, Prudy, what brings you out?" Don Jaime hailed him. "You'll stay for dinner, of course."

"I am mystified," Don Prudencio replied, and forthwith related in meticulous detail his impending sale of the Antrim sheep to a fat-headed old gentleman for a very great deal more than they were worth. "He said

his name was Blodgett, and signed the contract William L. Blodgett," the lawyer continued. "He did not say where he was from, but I could see he knew nothing of sheep and was a city man. His hands were soft and white and his shirt was too expensive. He did not bargain with me and he seemed to me to be quite too anxious to buy the sheep. So I telephoned to the Mansion House to inquire if he was stopping there and when I described him they said they had a guest there from New York by that name, but that his baggage carried the initials W. B. L.

"Hum-m-m!" Don Jaime grunted and sat up very straight. "He isn't a very good liar, is he? Any fool in this country would have known better than to leave a trail like that. What does W. B. L., of New York, want of the Antrim sheep, and why should he pay such a high price for them? This is indeed very mysterious, Prudy. Did he deposit the ten thousand?"

"He did. It was telegraphed from New York."

"I wonder what the old idiot is going to do with those sheep?"

"I imagine he's going to get Bill Dingle to care for them for him."

"Not on my range. Purdy, the minute those sheep pass out of possession of the estate of Thomas Antrim, deceased, they're going to get off the Higuenes range. If they linger there'll be a fight or a foot-race."

"Do you suppose Miss Antrim will agree to sell the sheep, my friend?" Don Prudencio queried.

"Sell them? Of course she'll sell them. You are her executor and you recommend the sale. I am her friend and business adviser and I certainly recommend it, and as the probate judge knows nothing of sheep and will be guided by such experts as you and me in making his decision, naturally he will sign an order of sale. And while he has the pen in his hand, Prudy, I think his honor should consent to the sale of the wool at the market price. Wool is going down. The growing popularity and cheapness of rayon is going to cost the estate some money on its wool, so get busy, Prudy. Have a drink, after that long and interesting report!"

"Weeth de-light," said Don Prudencio.

The following morning Don Jaime motored in to Los Algodones, and, because he was young and the day exceedingly fine and there was not the slightest reason on earth why he should drive there alone, Roberta accompanied him. As they swung down the main street past the Mansion House, with its row of chair-warmers on the front porch, Roberta started and laid a half-detaining hand on Don Jaime's arm.

"Jimmy, look! See that man sitting on the right of the line—the one in the blue overalls and canvas coat?"

"Yes."

"He's a replica of my Uncle Bill. If he had Uncle Bill's clothes on I'd get out and kiss him without question. Good gracious, what a marked resemblance! Why he and Uncle Bill are as near alike as twins."

"So?" murmured Don Jaime and stepped on his foot throttle. "Now that's mighty interesting."

He parked in front of the bank, excused himself to Roberta, entered and sought the cashier.

"Ed," he said, "yesterday ten thousand dollars was wired here to the credit of the Estate of Thomas Antrim, as a first payment on account of the purchase, by one Blodgett, of the Antrim sheep. That young lady outside in my car is Antrim's heir, Miss Roberta Antrim. I want to know what New York bank wired it."

"Certainly. I don't think I violate any confidence. The Twelfth National."

"Who ordered the transfer?"

"A man by the name of Glenn Hackett."

"Thanks," said Don Jaime, and climbed back into the car with Roberta. When they were half-way back to Valle Verde he said to her very casually, "Do you know a man in New York by the name of Glenn Hackett?"

Roberta jerked erect with surprise. "Why, yes! He's one of my dearest friends and my Uncle Bill's attorney. Do you know Glenn, Jimmy?"

"No—and I hope I never do. I dislike him very much."

"You shouldn't. He's a very fine gentleman."

"He's in love with you?"

"That's none of your business, and besides, if he were, Jimmy, you couldn't expect me to discuss the subject with you. Who has been telling you about Glenn Hackett?"

"The fairies," Don Jaime replied enigmatically. "One of my Irish forebears was a leprachaun and bequeathed me the power to guess things rather accurately." And though Roberta pressed him to tell her more and employed every feminine wile to break down his resolve not to, he refused, and in the end, incensed at the failure of her powers, Roberta lapsed into a somewhat sullen silence. As they alighted at the hacienda the outrageous man still further mystified her by saying:

"And I don't think so much of your old Uncle Bill, either."

This statement, when there was not apparently any reason why Uncle Bill should ever be the subject of thought, was the final feather that broke the back of Roberta's curiosity. "Jimmy," she pleaded, "would you care to save a human life?"

"Some humans. You, for instance."

"Then tell me what has lowered my innocent Uncle Bill in your estimation."

"He's crooked."

"Oh, Jimmy, he isn't! His friends call him Crooked Bill because he's—well, rather joyously sly, cunning and prudent. But dishonest—never!"

"He's out to boost the stock of this Glenn Hackett person to you and to depress mine."

Roberta smiled a small and knowing smile but said nothing. The extent of this man's occult powers fascinated her; she wanted him to do all the talking, in the hope that he would reveal how he received all his marvelous inside information.

"No, he doesn't play fair," Don Jaime protested. "He says one thing and means something else, so just for that, one of these bright days in the near future I'm going to take your Uncle Bill's conceit down a couple of notches."

"How do you know he doesn't play fair?"

He laid finger on lip. "Hush! It's a secret."

"Evidently," Roberta replied bitterly, after waiting about twenty seconds for him to impart the secret.

"I think I'll go back to Los Algodones," he announced suddenly. "There's something about the atmosphere of that town that aids my powers of divination."

"Am I invited to ride back with you? Or must I mope around the house until you return?"

"I think you had better mope. I have need to do some thinking—and you ditch my train of thought." He looked at her keenly, earnestly, and without the slightest flicker of love-light in his eyes. "Are you enjoying your visit at Valle Verde, Bobby?"

"Jimmy, I have never had such a good time in all my life. It's so radically different—and so are you. It's all so *dolce far niente*. When I arise in the morning, you're gone, and I wonder what makes you get on the job at six o'clock. Generally you are not home for luncheon, so everybody's genuinely glad to see you when you show up for dinner. And we do have such jolly times in the evening. I like to have you discuss your ranch problems with me—your calf branding, your cotton

crop, the haying, the canal and irrigation system. I think there's poetry in making the desert bloom."

"There's a devil of a lot of hard work in it," he answered grimly. "I have to spend considerable time with Ken Hobart, my new general manager, showing him all over the ranch, getting him acquainted with the details of his job and telling him how I like things done. You see, next year I'm going to play more. . . . I've wondered if you didn't feel a bit lonely and neglected here."

"Oh, no, Jimmy! You're such a friendly, comfortable person when you are around the house. Will you return from Los Algodones in time for dinner, Jimmy?"

"I don't know. I'll do my best to complete my business and be back in time. I don't relish driving around this country at night because just at present, for me, at least, the night has a number of eyes."

"You mean—"

"I mean that your foreman, Bill Dingle, has been across the Line, and something tells me he went there to hire some renegade to bump me off. I don't particularly blame him for that. A man acts according to his lights, and I gave Dingle and his men a pretty tough deal."

"But you went to town today unarmed, Jimmy?"

He shook his head, half removed his tropical whipcord coat and displayed a gun under each arm, in a shoulder holster. "I try to appear non-poisonous off

the ranch," he explained. "Well, I have a few friends who keep me advised on matters in which I am interested. I'm pretty safe in daylight, but coming home in the dusk I'd just as lief have a good man for company. So you stay home, Roberta, and I'll take Ken Hobart with me. He's very reliable."

Her eyes were wide with apprehension. "Please wait until morning," she pleaded, but he merely shook his head and with a careless nod left her, to drive over to the men's quarters for his foreman. Roberta stood in the patio entrance and watched him—saw Ken Hobart come out of the saddle room, receive his orders and go to his own adobe bungalow for his coat and a couple of carbines and ammunition belts. Then the two drove away, and Roberta, with terror in her heart, went to her room and wept, as her lively imagination pictured Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes, all bloody and limp, lying in the deep gray dust of the road to Los Algodones.

CHAPTER XX

IN the cool of the late afternoon Don Jaime dropped into a vacant chair beside Crooked Bill on the veranda of the Mansion House, after first inquiring, in Spanish, if by any chance the chair was reserved for any friend of his.

"Not at all," Crooked Bill replied in the same language, albeit haltingly, for the years had been long since his tongue had caressed so many vowels. "Help yourself, my friend."

"I thank you," Don Jaime replied in English, "I observe you do not speak Spanish too well. I beg pardon for addressing you in that tongue, but observing that you appear to be of this country I supposed you spoke the language of the country."

"Never was much of a hand at foreign languages," Crooked Bill replied with the utmost friendliness. He had been rather lonely in Los Algodones all day and was genuinely glad of an opportunity to hold converse with any decent citizen who desired it. And he had been struck by the appearance of this young man as the latter strode down the street.

Don Jaime produced two cigars and handed one to his neighbor. Crooked Bill favored the weed with a

swift, furtive appraisal, saw that it was a brand that retailed at three for a dollar, and decided he might risk it. "Much obliged," he murmured. "I'm a stranger here," he added. "My name's Blodgett—William Blodgett."

"I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Blodgett. I am Jaime Miguel Higuenes."

Crooked Bill started noticeably. "The hell you are!" he burst out, unguardedly.

"Ah, you have then heard of me?" Don Jaime's face betokened mild surprise and inquiry.

"Why, yes, Señor Higuenes—if you will forgive me for bringing up a delicate subject. I believe you're the young man who wafted old Tom Antrim into the bosom of Abraham."

"I had the pleasure," Don Jaime replied modestly.

"Would you mind shaking hands with me, Señor Higuenes? By the holy poker, that was a first-class job of work you did on Tom. I'm delighted to meet you, sir."

"The pleasure is mutual, Mr. Blodgett. You knew Antrim?"

"I should tell a man. He skinned me on a cow deal once. That rascal was so low he could kiss a rat without bending his knees."

Don Jaime smiled. "I believe, Mr. Blodgett, that you and I have interests in common. Suppose we cement our acquaintance in two fingers of *tequila*. I know a place where we can get it."

"Boy," said Crooked Bill, "you're a gift from God.

It's just about first-drink time and I've been sittin' here sufferin' for lack of a friend to hoist one with. But we'll pass up the *tequila,* because I have a couple of quarts of thirty-year-old Bourbon in my room. The hell of it is there's no ice in this hotel."

"I will get ice from the soda clerk at the drug store, Mr. Blodgett. Mint, also, is available, and if you will permit me, I will make a julep after the manner taught me by my father. Although of Spanish persuasion he married a lady from Virginia and she taught him the great secret."

"Get on the job," ordered Crooked Bill, "and come up to my room, Number 86."

Five minutes later Don Jaime returned with the ice and the mint, and Crooked Bill arose and led the way upstairs.

"My ruse to get him to walk worked," thought Don Jaime. "He *has* a slight limp. Yes, beyond the peradventure of a doubt this sly old wretch is Roberta's uncle, and if I don't find out what he's up to before we part I'm far from being the boy I used to be."

Up in Number 86 Don Jaime mixed the julep, shaving the ice with a bowie-knife sorted out from under his coat-tail. Crooked Bill watched him, fascinated. "What part of our glorious Lone Star state do you hail from, Mr. Blodgett?" Don Jaime inquired presently.

"I come from El Paso." This was true. Crooked Bill had changed trains there.

"Thinking of settling in this part of the state?"

"Oh no! Fact is, I came down here to buy those sheep from Tom Antrim's estate."

"This is most unfortunate, Mr. Blodgett. I am a cowman and I had no idea I was fraternizing with a sheepman. Were it not for your antiquated liquor it would be incumbent upon me to retire instantly."

Crooked Bill laughed pleasurably. He liked this young man's gay frankness and humor although it disturbed him. Here (he reflected) was exactly the sort of male biped to appeal to his niece. Undoubtedly Don Jaime was one who could fence with that young woman, a foeman worthy of her steel. He had guessed as much after reading Don Jaime's letter to him and now he was certain of it.

"I hear Antrim's niece, who is his heir, is a guest at your ranch, Mr. Higuenes," he said cautiously.

Don Jaime nodded.

"Is she anything like her uncle?"

"Tom Antrim was her misfortune, not her fault. Miss Antrim is, without doubt, the most delightful, fascinating, provoking, adroit, belligerent, sportsmanlike and honest young lady it has ever been my fortune to meet."

"You're in love with her," Crooked Bill charged. It was his habit to attack without warning, for he knew the value of surprise and grasping the initiative.

Don Jaime shrugged. "What else would one expect?"

"Well, do you stand a Chinaman's chance?"

"Alas, no! A man like me is not for her."

"You strike me as a presentable sort of lad."

"I killed her uncle."

"Yet she's your guest."

"Oh, she realized I had no other alternative. However, under the circumstances I have thought it the part of wisdom to remain the good friend. I am afraid of that young woman. I fear she would not be an ideal wife for a Higuenes."

"You're an ass, young man," Crooked Bill cried sharply, all of his love and loyalty to his niece instantly outraged. "If she's all that you have just told me she is, she's a prize and you're a lobster not to go in and win her. Forgive me for telling you your business, but I'm an old man and I've known what it is to have that sort of wife."

"I have some pride," Don Jaime murmured sadly. "I could not risk a refusal. It would kill me. Moreover, there is another man—some fellow in New York." He sat down to permit the juleps to chill.

"Oh!" Crooked Bill was relieved. He was discovering things, and discoveries were not unpleasant. He eyed Don Jaime closely. "Dog-gone fine, upstanding, gutful sort of chap," he soliloquized. "And he doesn't look any more like I thought he'd look than those juleps resemble *tequila.* He's got his old man's stuff in him, though, and Roberta's got his goat. Gosh, I'm afraid she's just a trifle heartless!"

"So you're going to buy the Antrim sheep?" Don Jaime resumed.

"I've bought them—subject to the approval of the heir and the probate court."

"I'm very much afraid neither one will approve, Mr. Blodgett."

"Hell's fire! Why? I'm giving all they're worth. Perhaps more."

"Unfortunately, I want those sheep. They've been feeding for two months on grass that's rightfully mine and they've done so much damage to my range I might as well keep them there and make a profit out of them—for Miss Antrim. She tells me her uncle, who was very rich, has gone broke in the market, and she's hocked the sheep and the ranch to help him out. Says he was mighty good to her while he had money and now she's not going back on him."

"By George, she is a sport, isn't she?"

"If I permit you to buy those sheep where do you intend to graze them?"

"Don't intend to graze them. I'm going to sell them immediately."

"Locally?"

"Perhaps."

"That makes it a little binding. I wouldn't like to see you sell those sheep locally. While I can stand them on my range, for Miss Antrim's sake, my forbearance would cease if they belonged to anybody else and continued to trespass on my range."

"Is it your range?"

"No, it's state land, but I control the water. So I fear I'll have to outbid you on those sheep, Mr. Blodgett."

"I've got my heart set on them, son, and when that happens I usually get what I go after."

Don Jaime concluded it was time to strike. "You went after my dad once—and you didn't get him. He got you—in the heel—you cunning old four-flusher. And I'm here to tell you that the old greaser spirit isn't frozen in the veins of Patricio's son, Mr. William B. Latham!"

"Hell's fire!" Crooked Bill appeared about to collapse in his chair.

"I haven't figured out what you're up to, Mr. Crooked Bill, but it's devious, and Mr. Glenn Hackett is helping you out. You're framing something on me, and I think you merely want to get those sheep out of the way so your niece can be ordered home, leaving little Jaime Miguel Higuenes bereft. Not so, Bolivia. Those sheep stay and Roberta stays. I've got to have my chance. I'm a fast worker, but there's such a thing as indecent haste in courtship and I decline to disturb my dignity by appearing clamorous. That sort of thing would be fatal to my chances. Your niece is an outrageous coquette, if you must know it—and I bet you do—so it's my job to bust that young woman and marry her and I'd like to see the photograph of the antediluvian uncle that can throw a cold chisel into my cogs and get away with it."

"Hell's fire!" The words were almost a croak.

"You need your julep after that broadside. Well, here's to crime. All the hair off your sinful head, Uncle Bill. Do I keep the sheep?"

Crooked Bill thought swiftly of all the things he would have to explain if Roberta ever learned what he had been up to, and his thoughts saddened him. "Can you fix it with the judge to disapprove the sale?"

"Certainly. I'll offer ten cents a head more for those sheep than you have. I can't spare that amount of ready cash to put into sheep just now, so you'll loan me the money, secured by a chattel mortgage on the sheep—"

But Crooked Bill had been crowded far enough. "I'll see you in hell first."

"Where do you expect to land yourself if Bobby hears what you've been up to? Uncle Bill, Jim Higgins is talking to you now."

"Don't you call me Uncle Bill. Damn you, you're impertinent."

"How you do violate the rules of hospitality! Well, please answer my question."

"You've got me foul. Don Prudencio Alviso evidently didn't receive any instructions from you regarding those sheep, so the deal's gone through."

Don Jaime sighed. "I wanted it to go through—until I discovered the identity of the buyer. But I wasn't certain about you until I suggested a drink. I wanted to see you walk. If you didn't limp I was going to let you have the sheep. But if you limped—"

"You've been slow on the trigger, Jim Higgins. Just a few hours, though."

"Evidently. Why did you want those sheep?"

"So my niece would have no further excuse to remain at Valle Verde. I'm not playing you as the favorite in this race, Mr. Higgins, I don't want my niece to marry you. You confounded Latins are too mercurial. Besides, I don't want Roberta to live in Texas. She's like a daughter to me. I'd miss her. I'm an old man—"

Don Jaime sipped his julep thoughtfully. "I wouldn't bet more than a five-cent bag of tobacco that you're going to have your peace of mind disturbed, but—I'll disturb it if I can. You don't figure very largely in my plans, either, and I don't believe you ever went bust. Judging by the careless way you buy sheep, you must have money to burn. Shame on you for worrying your niece so."

"Well, that's my business, of course."

"Whom did you sell the sheep to?"

"Bill Dingle. That is, I haven't sold them to him yet, but the deal is ready to be closed."

"Ah, on jawbone, eh? You're going to take a chattel mortgage and sell at a loss, for Dingle is too good a sheepman to give you a profit on your deal." Don Jaime commenced to chuckle. "You're doomed to pay a high price for your fancies, Uncle William. Dingle will sell those sheep as soon as he can and beat it for parts unknown with the money, leaving you to charge

that chattel mortgage off on your next income tax statement."

Crooked Bill's face registered alarm. "You think so?"

"Well, after you've closed the deal I'll bet you a hundred thousand dollars he'll try to. And he'll succeed unless he's stopped. You've bought yourself an elegant little shooting scrape, that's what you've done."

"Hell's fire!" groaned Crooked Bill again.

"Let me know the minute the deal with Dingle is closed," Don Jaime begged, "because immediately thereafter I'm going to guard every water-hole, and those sheep of yours will die of thirst before Dingle can move them off that range."

"You appear to be holding all the aces."

"It's a habit of mine. What are you going to do about it?"

"I think I'll sell you those sheep," Crooked Bill faltered.

"You're regaining your senses. I'll buy them from you—at two dollars a head less than you paid for them. I've got the feed. They'll fatten on my alfalfa stubble after I've cut my last crop of hay for the season. Besides I have lots of hay. I never sell hay. I walk it off the ranch."

"You're a cowman. You don't want to monkey with sheep," Crooked Bill pleaded.

"I'd monkey with mad rhinos and lunatic elephants—at a profit. I'll get rid of the lambs as soon as they're

marketable. Then I'll send the fat old ewes and rams to market, and about Christmas I'll sell the cream of the flock, in lamb, for a nice price. I'll teach you to take a joke, mister. You horned in on my private affairs and now you've got to fee the fiddler. And I'll not pay cash, either. Five per cent interest on a chattel mortgage. However, you'll be safe with a chattel mortgage of mine."

"If I sell to you, will you give me your word of honor never to tell Roberta a word about this?"

"I'm willing to make that stipulation a part of the contract and set an agreed amount of damages to be paid if I fail to keep my covenant. However, most folks in this country usually take my word of honor, which I now freely give. Let's shake hands on it."

They shook hands. "You're a smart devil," said Crooked Bill admiringly. "I'm sort of sorry I conspired against you, but I had my reasons. I wanted Glenn Hackett, my attorney, to be my nephew-in-law. He's a gentleman."

"So am I."

"You're a wild Irish bandit."

"Nevertheless, folks in this country say I'm *muy caballero.*"

"Bah! You just get by, and one of these days you'll not. Somebody will tunnel you yet. I hear you've given my niece a wonderful horse."

"Yes, I'm pretty busy and I had to give her something to keep her occupied. She's schooling that horse

herself. I have also invented a plan for bottle-feeding her bummer lambs, and she's no end interested in saving as many of them as she can. She's certainly hell-bent on keeping you out of the poorhouse."

"Shut up," snarled Crooked Bill. "That julep's prime. Throw another together. I'm faint."

So Don Jaime manufactured another julep, and they had dinner, after which they strolled over to Don Prudencio Alviso's office and closed the sale of the sheep. "And now," Crooked Bill demanded, when the deal was consummated, "I'll forgive you a whole lot, Jim Higgins, if you'll tell me how come you got on to me."

So Don Jaime told him. "Serves me right," the old gentleman declared. "I played my hand poorly. Well, I'm out of the sheep business, it seems, so about all that's left for me to do now is to go back to New York."

"Oh, say not so, Uncle Bill. Just go back to the hotel, climb into your regular clothes and come along out to the ranch with me. You'll surprise Roberta. She'll think I sent for you, just to give her a pleasant surprise, and she'll be very grateful. Thus I shall boom my stock a bit with her."

"Think I had better take a chance?"

"Of course. Besides, I want you to see Valle Verde."

"I saw it twenty-five years ago."

"You'd never know the old homestead now. I want to show you the room you'll occupy six months of the

year. Then, when I visit you at Dobbs Ferry you can reciprocate and show me the room I'll occupy there six months of the year."

"I don't know that I could stand a solid year of you, young fellow."

"You may get on my nerves, too. But we can give the plan a tryout, can't we—provided I marry Roberta?"

"You going to ask her?"

"At the proper time."

"Thanks for the proffer of your hospitality, son, but I'll not accept it. You see, I'm going to put the skids under you and it just wouldn't be right to harbor such intentions while under your roof."

"I believe I begin to understand why my late father loved you and shot you. Well, I never ask for mercy. Hew to the line and let the chips fall where they will, Uncle Bill. So you're going to make Roberta come home, are you?"

"That's the program."

"Got a good excuse?"

"The best in the world. I've made another killing in the market, the sheep have been sold to advantage, and she hasn't an excuse in the world for hanging around Valle Verde waiting for you to screw your courage up to the point of proposing."

Don Jaime sighed. "Well, I'm not exactly shackled to those sheep. I have good men to care for them. I suppose there's a hotel of sorts in Dobbs Ferry where I

can put up while paying court to Roberta," he announced plaintively. "She'll invite me to the house, of course, and you'll have to stand for it, because you can never give a good and sufficient reason for objecting to me. You know, deep in your wicked old heart, Uncle Bill, that I'm quite a fellow."

"By the holy poker, you are!" Crooked Bill admitted, and Don Jaime filled the room with his mocking laughter.

"Youth will be served," he jeered. Then suddenly he was serious. He leveled an accusing finger at Crooked Bill. "You tried to give me the wrong steer for winning Bobby, you hypocrite. Why, that girl wouldn't dream of falling in love with a man that pursued her! She's plumb spoiled and it's going to be my job to unspoil her. She knows I'm in love with her—and she doesn't know it. Sometimes she thinks I mean it and again she's sure I'm just giving her a mixture of Spanish-Irish blarney—telling her the things I think she likes to be told. The uncertainty is driving her crazy. She's accustomed to having young men fall in love with her, but when they don't appear interested in promoting an early marriage—well, that's brand-new stuff, and Bobby doesn't know what to make of it.

"I'm not a fool, Uncle Bill. Before I ask Roberta to marry me I mean to be certain she's going to like Texas well enough to live in it. I want to know that life will not be too dull for her on Valle Verde. I want her to know the job I'm doing and why I'm doing it. I want

her to realize that if she marries me she's got to be an asset, not a liability. Consequently, I want her to stay another month, at least, and learn things. She'll still think the sheep are hers, because Prudy here will not tell her of the sale of the bleating nuisances to you, nor of your subsequent sale of them to me. And, of course, she knows and you know that I'm not a fortune-hunter."

"She'd never be happy with you. You're too fierce and tough, in your friendly, humorous way, which is just your camouflage. You're a dangerous man."

"Look here, Uncle Bill, has it occurred to you that an Higuenes is stepping out of his class to mate with an Antrim?" All the fierce, hot pride of his Spanish ancestors was flaring in Don Jaime's black orbs. "You knew my father. You know the tribe of Higuenes. We have no family skeletons, and if Tom Antrim suborned one murder he suborned half a dozen. My Spanish ancestors were not peasants, I'll have you understand."

"Oh, I know that! It's your Irish ancestors that I object to."

"Ireland was Ireland when England was a pup. My Irish ancestors were twanging harps in Tara's halls when your Anglo-Saxon progenitors were blubbering because somebody had stolen their bearskins and left them naked."

"Oh, well, let's not talk about it. You've had your way with me and now I'll have my way with you if I can. I wouldn't fool you, boy."

Crooked Bill held out his hand, but Don Jaime did not see it. "Shake hands with me," the old rascal pleaded, "and I'll give you two quarts—full quarts, too—of that thirty-year-old and go all the way back to New York as dry as a covered bridge."

Don Prudencio Alviso rolled his liverish eyes in suppressed excitement. "Come, Jimmy," he urged, "be friends with thees ol' man. Eet is a long time since those damn' proheebeetion—"

Don Jaime seized Crooked Bill's soft hand and ground it to a pulp. "Brute!" snarled Crooked Bill. "You make me remember the Alamo!"

Nevertheless he kept his word, and as Don Jaime's legal adviser, Don Prudencio was present to see that he did. The two dons divided the loot!

CHAPTER XXI

AN hour later Crooked Bill boarded the train for El Paso, but before doing so he sent the following telegram to Glenn Hackett:

THE SHIP IS SUNK WITHOUT A TRACE SO BRACE YOURSELF FOR BAD NEWS STOP THIS HIGGINS BOY GAVE ME CARDS AND SPADES FOUR ACES BIG AND LITTLE CASINO AND BEAT ME TO DEATH ON THE SWEEPS STOP I AM MIGHTY SORRY YOU HAVE LOST BUT FAR FROM DEPRESSED THAT HE APPEARS TO BE GOING TO WIN STOP HOWEVER WE WILL KEEP ON TRYING ALTHOUGH I HAVE NO HOPE STOP I BELONG IN A HOME FOR THE FEEBLEMINDED.

At almost the same time Don Jaime joined Ken Hobart in front of the Mansion House.

"Any luck?" Hobart queried anxiously.

"I'm in the sheep business and may God have mercy on my soul, Ken. Tomorrow morning we'll pay off that gang of murderers Dingle has herding those sheep and put our own men on the job. Dingle gets the raus, too."

"Well, you'll clear a nice profit, won't you, chief?"

"What," replied Don Jaime mournfully, "doth it profit a man if he gaineth the whole world and suffereth the loss of the lode-star of his existence?"

"None whatever," Ken admitted, without knowing in the least what he was talking about.

Five miles outside Los Algodones his sharp eyes observed something far ahead and off the side of the road. He called Don Jaime's attention to it. In the starlight a tiny red dot gleamed.

"Cigarette—Mexican—careless," Don Jaime murmured. "Ah, he's doused it. Getting ready for business." He reached down into the tonneau and brought up a carbine; simultaneously Ken Hobart swung the car off the road and went crashing away through the low sage in a wide arc. "There may be holes and dry watercourses on this road," he announced calmly, "but we'll have to take a chance."

He switched off the lights just as a volley of rifle fire broke the stillness of the night. The car was hit twice but most of the bullets droned overhead. Don Jaime pumped his carbine, firing at the flashes, and the car crashed on; when the magazine was empty he set the rifle back in the tonneau.

"They'll be careful after that," he announced calmly. "They'll not close with us, because they know we're bad medicine at close quarters, Ken. Better swing back into the road."

They did, and reached the hacienda without further incident. Don Jaime alighted and entered the patio,

while Ken Hobart drove the car to the garage. Roberta was in the gallery waiting for him; at his approach she ran swiftly to meet him.

"You're safe, Jimmy?" she cried in a choking voice.

"Reasonably so, Bobby," he replied. "My information was correct. Dingle's crowd of imported killers laid for us." He held his hat toward her and ran his fingers through two holes in the crown. "And that bonnet cost me forty dollars," he grieved.

"Oh, Jimmy! What if he'd aimed lower!"

"There'd only be another new face whining around the devil, my dear. Well, that finishes Bill Dingle in Las Cruces County. Tomorrow he goes and on the run, or somebody will be carrying him to slow music that he won't hear. Tomorrow morning, Bobby, we'll take a check book and call on Brother Dingle. I'll pay him and you fire him; if he goes peaceably I'll not deduct the cost of this hat."

She stood staring at him, her breast heaving, her eyes moist.

"Have you been worried, Bobby?" he asked gently.

She nodded.

"It's been a long time since anybody worried over me, Bobby. What will I do when you're gone?"

"What did you do before I came, Jimmy? And I—I think—Jimmy, I'd better go soon. There's really nothing more of a business nature for me to attend to. There never was, in fact—just a few papers to sign, some sheep to look at—and they're really your

worry, not mine. And I don't want to worry you with them, Jimmy. I must tell you that this afternoon I received a letter from my uncle. It seems that after losing his money on a big rise in General Motors, he plunged again on the same stock, anticipating it would drop sharply. Our friend—Glenn Hackett—backed him, and I secured Glenn with an assignment of the Antrim estate. There are no other heirs, you see. Well, the stock performed as expected, and Uncle Bill is on his feet again. Glenn is paid back, and Uncle Bill wants me to sell the sheep for whatever I can get for them and come home."

"Well, that's certainly very nice news for all hands with the exception of the Higuenes boy. I don't want you to go, Bobby. We're just getting acquainted with each other."

"And I don't want to go, either—so soon. It's been wonderful to visit Valle Verde. I'm interested in those bummer lambs, and I love the horse you gave me. I like to ride around the ranch with you and your men, and when I think of a dry year and the water low in your irrigation ditches I can sense something of your worries. It's quiet here, so peaceful. At first I thought it such a forlorn country, but now I can see the beauty in it—those bare hills to the east at sunset and those fruitful fields of yours at dawn. I can understand why you love it, Jimmy, and why you wouldn't give it up for anything in the world. It's yours. This land is part of you, these people are your responsibilities. It must

be wonderful to have responsibilities. I never had any until recently. And you have so many—so very much unfinished business too—that you mustn't take risks. You mustn't fight with that Dingle man."

"Oh, there will be no fight. I'll just tell him to get out of Las Cruces County and he'll get out. He claims he has a contract by which he owns ten per cent of the flock increase. If it's a valid contract we'll give him his ten per cent, or buy the lambs from him. I'll treat him fairly, but if he lingers he'll be out of luck. By the way, is Glenn Hackett a pretty fine fellow?"

"As fine as a man can be, I think."

"Are you going to marry him, Bobby?"

"No." She fairly fired the word at him.

"Excuse me for being curious about your business, Roberta, but I just wanted to know if you had a reasonable excuse for going back to New York. You're very welcome here. In fact you brighten the old place up a heap. Won't you please stay a little longer?"

"No, I think not, Jimmy."

He shrugged. "Well, suit yourself. But anyhow, we'll tie a can to Dingle and his men before you go. I'll put my own men in charge of the sheep, and at the first opportunity to dispose of them at a decent price Prudy and I do so. No sense losing money on them." He stifled a little yawn. "I'm tired, Bobby. Breakfast at six tomorrow morning. Will you join me? Then we can get an early start for the old Antrim ranch and jolt Mr. Dingle out of his complacency."

She nodded and turned away to hide the tears of mortification that were welling to her eyes. Why couldn't he see that she did not want to leave Valle Verde at all? Why had he not urged her to stay? Of course he had urged her, but then he had not been persistent in it. If he had persisted she would have reconsidered. No, he did not love her. Absolutely not! Outwardly he was fiery; inwardly he was cold.

There was a sort of callous cruelty about him, a fierceness that repelled her—and in her resentment at that careless shrug and his complacent, "Well, suit yourself," she forgot that there was about him, also, a surpassing tenderness and thoughtfulness and a vast capacity for deep feeling and self-sacrifice. She forgot that he was courageous, hard-working and humorous; she remembered only that he was a disturbing influence in her life and she loathed disturbing influences. She told herself she was beginning to think too much of him and his affairs; when a woman commences worrying over a man and weeping because he is in danger—and he is so blind he cannot see it, so callous he does not care, it is time to go out of his life.

Roberta felt very miserable as she bade him goodnight with a little catch in her throat.

CHAPTER XXII

AT breakfast he noted the faint circles under her eyes and rejoiced exceedingly thereat. "When they worry so about a fellow that they can't sleep, a deaf man with his ear to the ground may not infrequently catch the faint sound of distant wedding bells," he reflected. "Lord, how I'd love to walk around the table to her and take her in my arms and tell her what a brute I am. But I dare not. I must be strong. I must be indifferent. I must appear impervious to her—and how she resents that. Resents it all the more because she can't say anything. The only thing she can do to save her face is to run away, and if I let her run I'm the prize burro of all Texas."

They chatted in desultory fashion during the meal; then Roberta went to fetch her coat and hat. She was waiting for him at the patio gate when he emerged from the ranch office, a carbine in his hands, a belt of ammunition around his waist and the two pearl-handled pistols tied down to his legs. Julio brought the enclosed car up and when they climbed in, Roberta noticed that beside Julio sat Ken Hobart. He was armed similarly to his chief and carried a spare carbine—for

the use, in an emergency, of the boy Julio, doubtless. An hour later they pulled up at the Antrim ranchhouse.

It was a tumble-down affair set in the middle of a desolate field. A few chickens scratched in the weeds, a sheep dog lay on the front porch and eyed them suspiciously, the snouts of two half-grown hogs protruded from under the house. Not much of a heritage, Roberta thought, as she gazed on the lonely and unpleasant scene.

Ken Hobart got out, walked to the front door and banged on it loudly. A Chinaman, in a greasy apron, opened it.

"Where's Dingle?" the foreman demanded.

"He go ketchum sheep. No come back long time."

Hobart walked around the house and inspected the interior of an equally dilapidated barn.

"I imagine the Chinaman's telling the truth. Dingle's car is not in the barn," he reported.

"We've had our drive for nothing, Ken. Well, we'll go back to Valle Verde, put a couple of saddle-horses in a truck and run down to the range where the sheep are. We'll go as far as we can with the truck, and this car, then unload and ride up into the hills. Game for the journey, Bobby?"

She nodded and they whirled across the dusty plain to Valle Verde. Here four horses were saddled and led up a ramp into a large motor truck, and, preceded by the motorcar, they headed down the road toward Los Algodones.

From time to time Don Jaime's riders had reported on the approximate location of the main body of sheep still on the open range and the direction in which they were moving; consequently he was enabled to make a good guess as to where he would find them today. They left the road presently and broke trail across the sage to the foot-hills, where the ramp was let down from the rear of the motor truck and the horses backed out.

"Ken, you and Julio ride in a northeasterly direction," Don Jaime ordered. "Miss Antrim and I will ride in the general direction of that butte yonder to the southeast—the one with the old landslide scarring its western front. Aurelio, you will remain here with the truck and the motorcar. We will meet here not later than four o'clock this afternoon, Ken."

Roberta mounted the hunter Don Jaime had given her. To her surprise she found a light carbine protruding from a holster swung under the sweat leather on her stock saddle, and a belt of cartridges hung over the pommel.

"Am I expected to do some shooting in the event of emergency, Jimmy?" she queried, as he mounted and rode up alongside her.

"Not at all. But you *can* shoot—at least that magazine article I read about you so stated—and I thought you might relish knocking over a wolf or a puma, or even a wild turkey, if we should happen to flush one. If we should get separated, even briefly, I'd feel better

to know you were armed. I've been charged on this range by wild hogs."

"In that event I imagine I can take care of myself," she assured him.

They rode steadily into the southeast, gradually climbing the butte; when they reached its crest a wide valley lay outspread before and below them, and Don Jaime reined in his horse. With his binoculars he swept the country for miles in every direction, but there was no sign of the vast flock.

"It would seem we're in for a good hard ride if we are to find Mr. Dingle with those sheep," Roberta ventured, as he lowered the binoculars.

"They were in that valley yesterday and two miles south of it the day before. There's feed for a week yonder. . . . I don't understand." He searched with the glass again to the south, then handed it to her. "Do you see a slight film of white dust in the sky—rising beyond those low slate-colored hills yonder?" He pointed. Roberta adjusted the glasses and looked. The cloud in question was very faint, but—it was a cloud.

"Sheep moving—south," Don Jaime informed her laconically. "And that portion of the range has been well grazed over. Roberta, I have a hunch your Mr. Dingle is yonder with that dust cloud headed for Mexico with the said sheep."

"You mean—he's stealing them?"

"I do. There's fair range below the Rio Grande—

for sheep—and it isn't at all a difficult job for the Dingles of this world to get across the line without being detected. Money sometimes does it, more frequently guile. Well, we can't afford to lose our sheep, can we?"

"It would mean a severe loss," Roberta answered. "Is there no way to stop him?"

"Of course there is. He's ten miles from the border and he can't possibly get there with thirty thousand sheep under two days; when he gets to the river he'll find sixty of my men between him and the farther shore. However, it isn't good business to permit him to make that drive, because it will entail some loss en route and far heavier losses getting the sheep back on the range again. Feed is pretty scarce along that route too, and a sheep has little vitality. Water isn't any too plentiful either. Bobby, I've got to stop that procession at the first water-hole, scatter Dingle and his men and put my own brave boys in charge. Meanwhile, we'll ride down to that dust cloud and make a reconnaisance."

They did, keeping to the backbone of the western fringe of foothills. From time to time Don Jaime scanned the territory around him for signs of herders; he had a suspicion that Dingle might be adroit enough to throw out a rear-guard and he was taking no unnecessary chances.

An hour of hard riding brought them to the crest of the slate-colored hills. Below them a plain sloped

gently into the bluish haze; faintly to them came the continuous bleating of sheep; a dirty gray blur indicated the flock—and it was moving southward, slowly, tortuously, as a worm moves. At its rear and on the flanks, little black dots, that were herders and sheep dogs, urged the weary animals along. Don Jaime counted the largest dots.

"Twenty herders," Roberta heard him remark, half to himself. "Hum-m-m! It doesn't look as if it would be quite safe to give Bill Dingle his walking papers today. He is not in a mood to accept them." He cased his binoculars, whirled his horse and, without even a look at the girl beside him, started back the way they had come.

"What are you going to do, Jimmy?" she asked anxiously, spurring up alongside of him.

"We're going back to the motorcar, Bobby. I'm going to send Aurelio back to Valle Verde for reinforcements."

"Will there be a fight?"

"I think so, Bobby. Dingle has twenty herders. Six, with the dogs, should be ample to maneuver those sheep. So it looks as if he had prepared for trouble, and when men prepare for trouble it's a pretty good sign they will not avoid it."

"I don't want a fight," the girl cried passionately. "You and some of your men may get hurt—killed."

"Quite likely. I have no intention of making this anything but a slaughter."

"Oh, Jimmy, please listen to me. This is not your fight. It's mine and I'd rather lose every head of those awful sheep than have anybody killed defending them. Send to Los Algodones for the sheriff and a posse to head Dingle off. This is the sheriff's business, not yours."

"A good plan for weaklings," he replied curtly. "You seem to forget that even members of a sheriff's posse are expendable. Bobby, there's always an open season on thieves, and any citizen, catching a thief red-handed, may help himself to the sport to the limit of his desires and his ammunition. It's always been the custom in this country for men to protect their property from thieves, and the Rancho Valle Verde has always been organized to do its own dirty work."

"I forbid you to make another move in the protection of my property, Jimmy. I can stand the loss—now. If anything should happen to you I'd never forgive myself."

He smiled across at her benignly. "And if I ever fell so low as to let a thief escape in daylight I'd never forgive myself, Bobby. I'd lose caste in my own country." He spurred his horse into a canter.

"But those sheep are mine," she cried desperately. "The affair is none of your business."

"Your business is my business. What sort of invertebrate do you think I am?"

"Jimmy—please listen to me."

He glared at her. "I'm ashamed of you. I thought

you had courage. You haven't—so now it seems I must tell you something. Those sheep are not yours. They're mine! Don Prudencio had an offer for the lot from a man named Blodgett. The price was right—and Prudy and I decided you should sell. The court agreed—and we sold. Yesterday the buyer decided he had made a mistake—and sold the sheep to me at a lower price."

"Why did you buy them? You loathe sheep. They're a nuisance to you."

Don Jaime grinned mischievously. "Well, if you must know, those sheep were all that held you to the Rancho Valle Verde—and I didn't want to see you go—so soon. I didn't intend to tell you about this, of course, but circumstances compel me. What I own I keep—and I'll always fight for my own. Now is your conscience quieted?"

Roberta commenced to sob. "Oh, Jimmy, I'm afraid—terribly afraid! I have a presentiment you'll be killed."

"Would that matter so very much to you?" His hand closed over her arm. "Look at me, Roberta. Would it matter so very much?"

She nodded an affirmative, unable to trust herself to speak.

He said something in Spanish. Roberta suspected it was an oath! "I'm the picture of bad luck," he complained. "I don't want this fight, but I just can't afford to let Dingle get away into Mexico with a quarter of a million dollars' worth of my property. The loss might

put me into the hands of a receiver—so, much as I would like to oblige you, Bobby, I must inform you that about sunset hell's going to pop over yonder."

The tears coursed down her cheeks. She was beyond words now. "Don't feel badly, Bobby," he urged. "We'll open the fight at long range. Ken and I are absolutely deadly up to a thousand yards—and we'll both be shooting army Springfields cut down to sporting models. Those herders are mostly Mexicans—riff-raff—bandits parading for the past fifteen years as patriots, and at ranges beyond three hundred yards their shooting is sloppy. I know, Bobby. I've been through a dozen brushes with them."

"Oh, Jimmy! Please—please, for my sake."

He pulled up his horse and glowered at her. "My dear girl," he cried sharply, "you're trying to make a quitter out of me. When a man permits a woman to rob him of his strength he might as well get killed and have his shame over with. Is that understood?"

Roberta nodded miserably. What argument of hers could prevail above this logic? And yet, beneath her cold fear there burned a wild pride that he had made his decision so, and deep down in her rebellious, belligerent heart she knew that, come what might, she would not have it otherwise now.

CHAPTER XXIII

CANTERING where the ground permitted, moving at a fast running walk where it did not, Roberta and Don Jaime reached the waiting truck and motorcar in thirty minutes. Throughout the journey (following her host's announcement of his inflexible purpose to fight Bill Dingle and his herders before sunset) no word had passed between the two. Don Jaime rode ahead, occasionally looking back to see that all was well with the girl; seemingly, in his eagerness for conflict, he would gladly have dispensed with her society if he could. At least Roberta thus read his thoughts, nor was she far wrong, as his first subsequent words proved.

"Bobby, this job of mine is man's work. Aurelio is going back with the truck, so if you'll dismount we'll load your horse into it. Then, if you will be good enough to take the motorcar and drive it home for me I'll be your debtor."

"No," she answered sharply. "My horse and the motorcar should remain here. I might need the car to carry some wounded men to the doctor in Los Algodones or some dead men to the morgue. When this issue is settled I'll know what to do and I'll not have to be told."

"The objection you raise is a logical one. Have it your own way." He gave Aurelio his orders in Spanish and when the latter had departed with the truck, Don Jaime sat down on the running-board of the motorcar and motioned to Roberta to dismount and sit beside him. "Drop your reins. Your horse will tie to the breeze," he suggested. "Let's have a smoke. Soothing to the nerves."

"It probably would be—if you had any," she retorted, and climbed down beside him. "I cannot imagine any man enjoying a roughhouse more than you."

"You're a poor judge of human nature." His tones were dry. "Nobody likes a roughhouse where lethal weapons are used. I'm always very much afraid I'll get killed, and I don't want to die—now. In fact, I never did care very much about dying. Life's fairly sweet and, as you remarked recently, I have a lot of unfinished business to clean up. Mind where you throw your butt, my dear. This range is dry—and I don't want a fire. Yes, I could do with a whole lot of letting alone, Bobby."

"Well, I've suggested the sheriff. It's his business to apprehend sheep-thieves."

He did not answer this, because they had been over that ground already. He was thoughtful, blowing smoke rings. "I'll have to teach that below-the-Border gang a lesson," he resumed casually. "They must learn to stay at home. I'm four men shy on a fifty-fifty break in my ruckuses with those animals—four good men. One of them was Julio's father—and Julio shall

have his chance at reprisal this day. This matter is personal, Bobby, and I'm going to get every mother's son of those renegades if I have to follow them to Mexico City."

"You have no right to risk the lives of your poor, ignorant men to save your property," she flared at him.

"I haven't? Why haven't I? They're my men, aren't they? Didn't I inherit them? do I not employ them and house them and feed them and make them happy? Doesn't the doctor come out twice a week from Los Algodones to look over the ailing ones? Didn't my father and grandfather and great-grandfather accept them and their troubles? I'm loyal to them, am I not? They know I'd fight to the death for them, and lose every dollar I have in the world before turning them off to face that world—the gringo world they do not understand! Why shouldn't they be loyal to me? In fighting to defend my rights they fight for their own —and besides, we've all been raised together that way and there are some habits we do not care to break. 'Whose salt I eat, his song I sing.' A good slogan, and a very ancient one in this country."

The girl was sensible of a vague uneasiness as he looked her over sternly. She had not pleased him and he did not disdain to make her aware of the fact.

"I'm not a lawyer," he shot out at her suddenly. "What would your friend, Mr. Hackett, do if he were the owner of these sheep?"

"I imagine he'd have some sort of theft insurance

on them, so he wouldn't worry if Dingle stole them. He'd leave the worry and the salvage and the prosecution to the insurance company."

"Everything for defense but not one cent for tribute, Bobby. It's all in the point of view. Robbing banks has become a national industry, because the banks are insured against robbers and never put up a fight. Buckshot is a great deterrent to crime." He ground his cigarette butt under his heel. "Well, I suppose, now that you're out of the sheep business, Bobby, you'll be going back to Dobbs Ferry in a day or two."

"Well, of course, I *would* stay over for your funeral, Jimmy." She tried to appear jocular, but her quavering voice betrayed her real feelings.

His brown hand caressed her shoulder. "That's the girl. Act spunky, even if you're not. Nine times out of ten one can fool the enemy with a good bluff. You realize, don't you, Bobby, that I might send one of my *pisanos* over to Dingle and his gang with a message from me to the effect that if he and his men will depart promptly and peaceably I'll overlook his crime—"

"Oh, do that," Roberta pleaded. "Dingle's a coward. He'll quit."

"I know he will. But he may come back! And I don't care to be put to the worry and bother of keeping a small army of men out here herding those sheep and guarding them. So I elect to perform a surgical oper-

ation, and if blood spatters the operating room, what of it? We may effect a cure!"

"You are going to wait here until Aurelio returns with more men and horses? How many men have you sent for?"

"Twenty. Caraveo, the riding boss, will pick the best. That will be five trucks with four horses and their riders to each truck. Don't talk to me now, Roberta. I have to formulate a battle plan."

He took out a note-book and pencil and commenced writing. "Here," he said abruptly, when he had finished, "please hand this to Ken Hobart when he reports here. If nobody returns by twilight, drive the car back to the ranch. You know the way." He stood up, hitched his belt and held out his hand.

"Where are you going, Jimmy?"

"I'm going to circle ahead of those sheep and get to the only water-hole they can reach tonight. There's an old branding corral in the valley by that water-hole—one I built myself. I'm going to dig in there and hold that gang off. There is a tiny shanty by the corral where we keep tools for cleaning out the water-holes, so I'm fixed!"

"Surely you're not going alone?"

"Julio will follow at four o'clock. He's dependable. His dad was killed in the last raid—so this is his party. Good-by, Bobby—in case I do not see you again. It's been wonderful to have known you. When you get back to Dobbs Ferry think kindly of Jim Higgins, if

he's in the cemetery, and send him an occasional picture post-card if he's not. Your sheep money is in the local bank. Trust old Prudy. He looks like a dusky idol but he's cuter than any fox—and honest. Good-by, my very dear."

He took her hand. It trembled in his. "Jimmy," she said in a very small voice, "the other night you told me you loved me. Was that a statement of fact or just —ah—hooey?"

"It was a statement of fact. I'll love you as long as I live. Some day, if I live, I suppose I'll marry somebody else, but in the cool of the evening, darling, when the day's work is done and the Higuenes boy and his thoughts are alone together—well, I'll do some thinking. And if Mrs. Higuenes should say, 'James, what are you thinking of?' I shall tell her a harmless lie."

"I shall go home tomorrow, Jimmy—provided you come back to Valle Verde. If not—"

"They'll plant me in a hurry and you can go the day after, Bobby." He took her fresh, lovely face in his palms. "Bobby," he said very seriously, "remember me as the man who never made love for fun." And he kissed her on the lips and let her go. Dully, she watched him swing into his saddle and ride away; when he had topped the ridge he pulled up, looked back and waved his hand. Then he went over the sky-line.

CHAPTER XXIV

ABOUT three-thirty Ken Hobart and Julio returned and found Roberta face downward in the grass, sobbing as if her heart must break. When she raised her head at Hobart's touch it occurred to the general manager that it would require more than a little rouge and powder to repair the damage done by those tears.

"Where is the Big Boss?" he demanded in the matter-of-fact tone of one who beholds nothing unusual.

Roberta held out a couple of leaves of paper—Don Jaime's battle plan. Hobart read it. "The boy has some sense after all," he decided. "He and Julio will guard the water-hole and stand them off in front. I, with Fraser, Lambert, and O'Grady, and two good *pisanos* to be selected by Caraveo will flank them or take them in the rear. Well, thank God I've got three of my own kind with me! Caraveo, with the other fourteen men, will continue on to the river, for of course Dingle and his bunch will break for the Border the moment they realize they are actively opposed. Not to do so would be ruinous. And at the river dog will eat dog." He whistled. "Who says this is a dull country?" He spoke to Julio.

"Si, señor," murmured Julio, and rode away on Don Jaime's trail!

Ken Hobart, left alone with Roberta, did what his employer had done. He sat down on the running-board of the car and lit a cigarette, smoked it through in silence, lit another, and waited. Then:

"Crying over the old man?"

Roberta nodded, and added defensively: "I'm sure anybody would. Don Jaime's so young and so fine, and if he should get killed—"

"Quite so," murmured Mr. Hobart. "However, we have one consolation. He'll have a lot of company on the way up! Well, what can't be cured must be endured, and if that saddle-colored *hombre* gets his, about all any of us can do is to sing 'By-by, Blackbird!' I imagine he'll get killed—somehow."

"In heaven's name, why?"

"Well," said Mr. Hobart with exasperating deliberation, "he's madly in love with you, Miss Antrim, but he realizes that's all the good it's going to do him. He's a proud man, is that *colorado maduro* Mexican Mick. He realizes you'd never dream of marrying the man who killed your uncle—"

"My uncle was a scoundrel. He employed scoundrels."

"Still, he was your uncle. You know, of course, that with Don Jaime's breed of cat an uncle is a kinsman, no matter what he does. In jail or out of it, one is supposed to stick by his kinsman—down here. I've

felt like telling the boss he was all wrong about you, but then I'm only a hired man, and the hired man who speaks out of his turn to Don Jimmy gets fired pretty sudden."

"If you'd only told him!" Roberta wailed. "Oh, if you only had!"

"Why didn't you tell him yourself?" he retorted. "You're one of the parties at interest, aren't you?"

"There are things no girl can say—when a man acts as queerly as Don Jaime does, Mr. Hobart. He's so sensitive, so retiring—"

Mr. Hobart choked and to cover his strangled cachinnation coughed violently into his cupped hands. "About as sensitive and retiring as a steer on the peck," he retorted, "but he *is* proud. If he thought there was the least chance of your refusing him he'd never ask you to marry him in a thousand years."

"Indeed! Is that possible, Mr. Hobart?" Then, it suddenly dawning on her that her conversations with Ken Hobart hitherto could have been covered in five hundred words, she was appalled, not only at his garrulity but at her own. "Isn't this conversation getting a trifle—personal and delicate, Mr. Hobart?" she suggested. "Really, I haven't the slightest idea why I am discussing such an intimate subject with you."

"Well, I have. I want to discuss it," he replied calmly. "When I discover that Don Jaime has ridden away to get killed because life won't mean a thing to him after you're gone—and when I find you ruining

your peaches-and-cream complexion crying over this greaser—"

"How dare you? He's not a greaser!"

"Nobody but a greaser would act the way he does. Well, as I was saying, having discovered the lay of the land, I felt it my Christian duty to interfere and offer some sound advice."

"What do you advise, Mr. Hobart?"

"Would you marry this Higuenes *hombre* if he asked you?"

Roberta blushed furiously and hung her head.

"Come," Mr. Hobart urged, "this is serious business. There's a question before the house and it merits an answer. To hell with all this false pride! Speak up like a man. Would you marry the idiot and chuck all your sheep money into the pot with him and help extend his irrigation system and buy about a thousand pure-bred Hereford breeding cows?"

"I would, gladly. If I married him I'd be his partner as well as his wife. I could be a good partner."

"None better," agreed Mr. Hobart. "Well, if you want him, go get him. He's yours for the asking."

"Mr. Hobart! How dare you? No girl asks a man to marry her!"

"That's why we have so many old maids, Miss Antrim. I advise you to take a leaf out of Don Jimmy's book, and whenever you want anything go get it. Now, listen to me. If you hop aboard that horse of yours and ride after Julio he'll lead you to that old

branding corral where he and Don Jaime are going to dig in and do some fancy shooting. You can easy follow Julio. He's riding a pinto hoss and even two miles away that hoss looms up. You'll have time to get to the scene of the festivities before they get going, have your little pow-wow with Don Jimmy, and then beat it back here before dark."

"Oh, Mr. Hobart, I couldn't! I'd feel so brazen. I'd die of shame."

"Very well, then, die. Don Jimmy is sure to die, because he doesn't want to live. Of course he'd never let you know that, but right here in this note he left me he says: '*Adiós, amigo.* See that Miss Antrim gets to the station all right, and whatever you do, don't plant me in the same cemetery with her uncle.'"

"But if he's bent on getting killed—"

"He wouldn't be so bent if he knew his luck, the fool! You tell him things and he'll keep his head down. He may even pull out of the fight and let me and my men do his dirty work for him."

"Mr. Hobart, you are not loyal to Don Jaime. Whatever his faults—and I believe he has a few—he kills his own rats."

"He's got Spanish blood in him," the sage urged, "and there's a quitting point in all of his breed. They die well after they've lost hope, but while they have a shred of hope left they're the champion long-distance runners of the world. You can save a human life if you care to. If you do not care to—well, that's your own business."

"I wish I could feel that your judgment in this matter is not in error, Mr. Hobart."

"It isn't. I get my information direct. It seems Don Jaime and Mrs. Ganby got to discussing you and him the other day. Mrs. Ganby's about twenty years older'n Don Jaime, so she talked to him like a son. Being a woman she sees things no mere man would recognize if he walked over 'em. Well, Don Jimmy gave her his confidence and both of them forgot little Robbie was listening in. What he heard disturbed the boy. He got the notion, from what Don Jaime said, that you didn't care for his hero, so he come over to my quarters to talk it over with me, man-fashion. That's how come I found out. Then, too, I never did see Don Jimmy so depressed as he's been here of late."

"I hadn't noticed it, Mr. Hobart."

"He wouldn't let you notice it. But he let down a mite to me."

Roberta got up, walked to her horse and mounted him. "Thank you a lot, Mr. Hobart," she gulped. "You're a true friend."

"I'm glad I measure up. I'd be out of luck if the boss's wife got sore at me. Hello, here come Caraveo and the trucks. I must head him off and send him down the road a few miles farther, to save time." He made a flying leap to his horse and galloped away to meet the riding boss.

Just as Roberta disappeared over the sky-line he gave Enrico Caraveo his orders, then without waiting

for his five men to follow he galloped swiftly after the girl.

"Damn it," he muttered, "I got so interested fixing things for Don Jimmy I clean forgot that girl wears pants, and a two-gallon hat. Some one of those roughnecks may mistake her for a man!"

CHAPTER XXV

KEN HOBART was an excellent poker player, which is equivalent to saying that he was a very shrewd guesser. It is to be regretted, however, if we are to regard his peccadillos literally, that he was also a very good liar, but that he was a keen observer no one who knew him would have had the hardihood to deny. Heretofore he had been much too preoccupied with the responsibilities of his job as Don Jaime's general manager to waste any time speculating on his employer's *affaires de cœur*. When Don Jaime first presented him to Roberta, Hobart had instantly decided that she was merely one of what he had learned, through reading the Sunday supplements, to term society girls; and society girls, according to Ken Hobart's primitive code, were the sort of female no man with the bark on could afford to take to wife, being much too skittish for the obligations of the married state in districts where the phrase "until death us do part" still is taken seriously. He knew Don Jaime Miguel Higuenes, so it never occurred to him that the latter would permit himself to fall in love with his guest; and in the brief contacts with Roberta it had seemed to him that Don Jaime would be the last man in the world she might be expected to fall in love with.

Robbie's visit to him and the confidential information revealed by that young eavesdropper had first amused and then interested Hobart. Robbie was furious at Roberta for her apparent failure to appreciate his beloved Jimmy and was for going to her and chiding her about it. Hastily Ken Hobart vetoed that procedure, but promised Robbie to look into the matter and see if something couldn't be done about it.

Well, he had done something, nor had he been too particular as to the means employed for its accomplishment. To Mr. Hobart's direct way of thinking, this charming guest at Valle Verde had demonstrated that she was not, after all, a heartless society girl. He had found her weeping in terror and grief because, forsooth, she had an idea Don Jaime might presently be killed. Many years as a Texas ranger had convinced Ken Hobart that the prospects of Don Jaime's demise were far from nebulous; consequently he had to take those tears seriously. There was going to be a fight. No doubt about that. And somebody usually got hurt in such fights.

So Ken Hobart had thought quickly. There wasn't the slightest necessity for Don Jaime mixing in this row; wherefore, if he could be persuaded to abandon the field, Ken felt that the defection would not remotely prejudice the victorious outcome of the sharp bit of Donnybrook that impended. How, then, to induce him to forego the sweets of reprisal? Why, by sending the girl to the scene of battle—just before it started. Her

arguments, consisting of tears, two kissable lips, two soft arms, and a declaration of love everlasting, would be potent indeed. Mr. Hobart would have bet his saddle on that. Wherefore, he had skilfully woven his web, with the result that Don Jaime and Roberta were now enmeshed in it.

The huge satisfaction felt by Ken Hobart at the success of his deceit and unblushing interference in other people's business was shattered now, as he thought of Roberta, garbed in riding breeches and flannel shirt and wearing the conventional wide-brimmed and high-crowned hat of the county. Riding along the sky-line she could very readily be mistaken for a man—and such mistakes, in the impending circumstances, might reasonably be fatal! It was incumbent upon him, therefore, to catch up with her, to guard her approach to that old branding corral in the valley, to make her take every advantage of the ground, to scout the territory for her.

Also, a new and disturbing thought had occurred to him. What if Dingle had decided to make sure of the water for the sheep by taking possession of the water-hole before Don Jaime could get there? Of course it was unbelievable that the latter would ride boldly up to the water-hole before making a careful reconnaissance, since instinct, the custom of the country, and his army training would indicate that course to him. On the other hand, was Don Jaime's mind completely on the task in hand? Was it not probable that thoughts

of a sentimental nature might lull him into indiscretion? Verily, Ken Hobart could take no chances. There was immediate need of haste and he hastened; and as he galloped along the backbone of the ridge he was sickeningly aware that he was not the only one who was hastening.

There was Don Jaime, to begin with, hurrying to get to the water-hole and consolidate his position. He knew the country well and was a hard, fast rider. After him came, on hot hoofs, his reinforcements—the devoted Julio. Duty was duty to Julio—and, as Don Jaime had stated, that youthful retainer had a personal interest in the forthcoming activities. Hurrying to catch Julio, that he might lead her to the water-hole, Roberta was pounding along on her fleet hunter; and after Roberta came Ken Hobart.

Hobart sighted the girl three-quarters of a mile or so ahead of him as he topped the ridge, but though he spurred his horse to its utmost speed he could not gain on her. Presently, two miles ahead of the girl, he caught a flash of white—a recurrent flash, as something moved among the brush and piñon trees. That, he knew, was Julio's pinto mount.

"If anything happens to that girl," he told himself, "I'll just keep right on in a general southerly direction and never come back."

The low range swung to the east—and suddenly, in a cup-shaped valley far below, Ken Hobart saw the sheep—saw that they were being driven, not grazed.

They were within a mile of the water-hole, and Julio was not in sight. At the foot of the range Roberta, stationary, sat her horse and took stock of the situation.

She had lost Julio!

Hobart looked back. In the distance he could see his five men following him. He waved his hat and one of them waved in return; so without further ado he rode down to join Roberta.

The girl held up her hand, enjoining silence, as Hobart reined in beside her. "Listen!" she commanded.

He bent his head. Faintly to him came the report of rifles.

"There were twenty herders with the band an hour ago," the girl reported. "Don Jaime counted them. There doesn't appear to be that many now."

Hobart swept the scene with his binoculars. "Ten! Half the gang went ahead to preempt the water, and Don Jaime has walked into them. He's alive and kicking, though. If he were not, there wouldn't be any shooting. And Julio hasn't got there yet. Well, he'll be careful. He'll probably come in from the rear and help the boss out. I wish I knew whether Jaime is in the old corral or at the water-hole. Smokeless powder, you see. One cannot tell. *But the sheep move forward!* That indicates confidence. Yes, Dingle has the water!"

"Then Don Jaime's fighting ten of them."

"Looks that way. He must be in the old corral, because he wouldn't last a minute in the open. The corral

is boarded close and the light is failing. If he keeps moving he will not be too easy to hit."

Julio rode out into the open a quarter of a mile south of them. Instantly Hobart pulled his rifle, sighted carefully and threw up the dirt in front of the boy to attract his attention. When Julio pulled up and looked around to see where the attack came from, Hobart waved his hat at him and moved out from the sheltering fringe of bushes onto the grassy floor of the valley, Roberta by his side. Instantly Julio recognized them.

"You stay where you are, girl," Ken Hobart commanded. "My other five men will be riding down the hill pretty soon. You tell them my orders are to charge the men with the sheep immediately."

"What are you going to do, Mr. Hobart?"

"I'm going to join Julio, and the two of us will advance along the south side of this valley toward the water-hole. The range will be too long for the herders with the sheep to stop us, I think. Jimmy's in a jackpot and needs help mighty bad, so Julio and I will furnish what we can. *Adiós!*"

He galloped away diagonally across the valley, motioning for Julio to join him. The boy did not hesitate. Roberta watched them in an agony of apprehension, until presently her ears caught the sound of increased rifle fire, but closer at hand.

The herders with the sheep were firing at Hobart and Julio, galloping across their front. Ken had stated that the range would be too long for effective fire by

men not versed in the science of accurate shooting at extreme ranges, but nevertheless the girl saw Julio's pinto go down, saw the boy shoot out over the animal's neck. He was up instantly and back beside the horse.

"Getting his rifle," Roberta thought. Ken Hobart had pulled up and was riding back to Julio, who, in turn, was running to meet him. There was not an instant's pause in the stride of the horse, yet Julio mounted double behind Hobart, the horse whirled, and the daring pair were on their way again.

There, alone at the foot of the hill watching this drama, Roberta prayed for those men as she had never prayed before; she cried out in agony when Ken Hobart's horse went to its knees, rose again—and stood still. Even one so unversed in warfare as Roberta could realize that the poor brute had been hit and crippled. She saw Hobart and Julio dismount and, kneeling some twenty feet apart, open fire on the distant herders as calmly as if shooting at a mark!

And then, over the crest behind her, came the five men detailed to follow Ken Hobart. They came down the slope at a fast gallop, spurred on by the sounds of conflict in the valley below, but slackened speed as they sighted the girl, holding up her hand in a signal to halt.

She trembled so she could, with difficulty, speak coherently. "Don Jaime—engaged at the water-hole with ten men—Ken Hobart and Julio over south—shooting at the herders—Ken says—rear attack."

The three American riders gazed at her, not quite comprehending, desirous, perhaps, of receiving more explicit instructions in such an emergency.

"What are you standing there for?" Roberta cried hysterically. "Follow me. I'll show you." With a savage little dig of her dull dress spurs she was off, the five men streaming behind her. Across the northern flank of the valley they raced, the patter of rifle fire from the herders probably drowning the sound of their thudding approach, for they were within a hundred yards of the nearest men before the latter saw them. One of them fired at Roberta. . . . She thrilled with a cold fear and a wild exaltation as the bullet whispered past her head . . . afterward she had a faint recollection of a dark, frightened, but defiant face that loomed for an instant in front of her before she rode the man down. Pistol shots . . . then a backward look. Behind her the five rode with upraised pistols, flourishing them at her, yelling a fierce approbation of her leadership.

The sheep, in panic, fled wildly, leaping over each other, bleating, leaving a cloud of grayish white dust behind them. Roberta rode into that cloud—rode through the fringe of stragglers, knocking them down, leaping over and among them. Her horse, plunging and swerving, was striving, with common sense rather uncommon in a horse, to avoid the woolly bodies under his feet, and Roberta was forced to ride as she had never ridden before. Pistols popped behind her. . . . She was clear of the sheep. . . . Her dull little riding-academy

spurs prodded her mount's flanks; the quirt rose and fell. . . .

She caught the gleam of sunshine as the last level rays of the dying day were reflected on a pool. Among some rocks beyond the pool three figures moved, the crackle of fire grew louder; she could discern the sharp, spiteful reverberation of it now. Where was the corral? Wherever it was, it could not be far distant. . . . Don Jaime was there, wounded, dying perhaps. . . .

She saw it—a circle of weatherbeaten boards, nailed so close together that the fence appeared like a wall. Straight at it she drove her mount, realizing vaguely as she did so that it was a hurdle at least a foot higher than she had ever faced in sport.

She saw her horse's ears flicker, felt his stride slacken a little; then his head shot forward and his ears came up straight. Good horse! He was not going to refuse the jump! She felt him gather himself for the leap, and took a firm grip on the reins.

"Alley oop!" she cried.

While in midair she saw Don Jaime off on the right flank, standing in the bed of a wagon, firing over the fence; then she was over and inside the corral with him.

"Jimmy!" she shouted.

He turned, staring at her amazed. Then he jerked the bolt of his Springfield and yelled:

"Down! Flat!"

She rode up to the wagon, slipped off, pulled the rifle

from the scabbard and untied the cartridge belt from her pommel. Then, with a slap on her horse's rump, she sent him trotting across the corral.

And then Don Jaime acted. He leaped down at her, his powerful arm swept her backward and off balance; she slid down his body gently to the ground and he threw himself beside her.

"Oh, my God, sweetheart, why did you come?" he almost moaned.

"Because I love you, Jaime Miguel Higuenes. You are in danger and I couldn't stay away. I'll help you, Jimmy. If you have to die I—want you to know before that happens—that life without you—will be desolate—"

He crooned to her in Spanish, his hot eyes devouring her, his grimy perspiring hands caressing her cheek. "I always knew you were a thoroughbred," he gulped finally. "Lie here and do not move. This is a private fight and you haven't been invited. I've got to keep moving. I've run miles from one side of this corral to the other, firing through knotholes and gaps in the boards. If I stay still they'll locate me and I can't afford that—now!"

He rolled away like a tumbleweed. A bullet crashed through the fence and struck where he had been lying a second before. And then Roberta proved herself a woman. She fainted.

CHAPTER XXVI

SHE came to lying in Don Jaime's arms in the dry grass beside the water-hole. She looked up at him without understanding, then closed her eyes again.

"Well, Jimmy," she murmured presently.

"We're back in the sheep business again," he assured her solemnly.

A silence. Then: "Any casualties, Jimmy?"

"Yes. Three dead horses and two wounded and about a dozen sheep with broken backs and legs. It seems you rode over them. Ken Hobart's pinked, but nothing worse than what he's been used to. Adolfo de Haro, one of my riders, is dead, and Lambert, O'Grady, and Martinez Trujillo are badly hit, but I do not think they will die. Julio Ortiz has lost a little finger. Dingle and nine of his men are dead to date and the final returns from the river should make the affair unanimous. Fraser, Juan Espinosa, and Julio Ortiz are following them. They took our mounts and now I'll have to get busy, load our wounded on Dingle's chuck wagon and go home."

"Was that his chuck wagon in the corral?"

"Well, it used to be your Uncle Tom's, so I presume it's yours now. Dingle got here first, ran his chuck out-

fit into the old branding corral to camp for the night and turned his mules loose there. Then he occupied the rocks beyond this water-hole and waited to see what might turn up before dark. I turned up—unexpectedly —rode wide around the herders, approached the corral from the rear and had opened the gate and entered before either side discovered I was trapped. They couldn't see me clearly, but through the chinks in the corral boarding they could see something moving against the light. At that they couldn't be sure that something was me, my horse, or their mules, and they didn't want to hit the mules, so they were careful.

"It was close work and after I'd moved around a lot and had located all the knot-holes and wide chinks in the boards I made them keep their heads down. Then when the firing started out on the flat, and they saw Ken's men, led by you, making a pistol charge on the men with the sheep, Dingle got cold feet. You rode through quite a barrage, sweetheart, but once you'd topped the corral they figured I had reinforcements, so they ran for their horses and rode south. That is, some of them did. I climbed upon the wagon seat and fanned their rear; as they fled down the south side of the valley they bumped into Ken and Julio, who emptied two saddles each. Do you know, darling, that you have a pistol bullet through the muscles of your back, rather well on the right side? Nothing fatal, but you'll sleep on your left side for a month!"

"I'm a little fool," Roberta murmured weakly.

"Yes, but a gallant little fool. You have some of your late Uncle Tom's ferocity and courage in you, Bobby. Oh yes, old Tom always preferred odds and good shelter in combat, but he would stand up to it when he had to. He couldn't be bluffed off this range and he forced me to make good."

"Are you hurt, Jimmy?"

"Not a scratch."

She raised her left arm and curled it around his neck; he lowered his face until his cheek touched hers. "You're such a terrible man," she whispered. "Oh, such a terrible man!"

"But you love me, just the same?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't have told you—I'd have died first. It's all due to Ken Hobart. He told me—"

"Hush, sweetheart. He's confessed. He told you a few of the most wonderful lies on record, and when he found you'd been hit he cried like a baby. Swore that if you died he'd commit suicide—provided I didn't kill him first!" He lifted her to a sitting position. "There's old Cupid Hobart sitting over yonder. Look at him. He's still blubbering."

"Ken!" Roberta called weakly.

The ex-ranger got up and limped painfully over to her, knelt and took her hand. "You're a grand liar," she murmurmed, "and a grand fighter, and a grand friend—and now I'm going to decorate you, Ken Hobart—on the field of battle."

"Kiss her, fool," Don Jaime roared. "And you can

kiss her again the day we're married. That's the privilege of the best man, but after that, believe you me, partner, she's not going to give away any more samples to hard-boiled old waddies like you."

"Oh, my God, forgive me," Ken sobbed childishly, and brushed her pale cheek with his tobacco-stained lips.

"On the lips, man," Don Jaime commanded. "You don't know good kissing when it's offered to you."

"I been chewin' tobacco," the victim protested.

"I don't care," Roberta assured him. "Jimmy chews it, too."

So the embarrassed wretch obeyed orders, and Roberta fainted again. "Don Jimmy, this time it's your fault," Hobart almost moaned.

"Fan her and mop her face with this wet bandanna," Don Jaime commanded. He went to the corral and searched in the chuck wagon for the tin box containing the small field first-aid kit he suspected might be there. It was, so he returned to the girl, cut her clothing away from the wound and applied first aid in a singularly workmanlike manner. Thereafter he attended to his wounded men and when that task was done he caught the chuck-wagon mules in the corral, harnessed and hitched them, spread out on the floor of the wagon box the bedding rolls he found there and loaded his casualties into the wagon.

"Home, James," he called cheerily to an imaginary

chauffeur, climbed up onto the seat and gathered the reins. He peered down between his legs at Roberta's face upturned to him from the wagon bed.

"You'd have to live a few lifetimes in Dobbs Ferry, Westchester County, New York, before you'd get your teeth into life as deeply as you have in the past hour and a half," he assured her cheerfully. "Whose spunky old sweetheart are you?"

"Youse," said Roberta wearily.

"Giddap," yelled Don Jaime, and flicked the rumps of the leaders with his long whip. Gently he eased the mules into their collars and rolled away up the valley into a long draw that wound between the hills and eventually led them out to where the deserted motorcar waited. Here he transferred his wounded—Lambert, O'Grady, and Martinez Trujillo on the rear seat, with Ken Hobart on the front seat. Lastly he lifted Roberta up into Hobart's arms, after which he braked the chuck wagon, unhitched the mules and tethered them to the wheels.

"Guess they can stand a night of watchful waiting," he declared, and climbed in back of the wheel. "And maybe I wasn't a smart boy when I put Mrs. Ganby on the payroll permanently. Nothing like having a good trained nurse around in an emergency like this. Hold on, everybody!"

He switched on the lights and tooled the car carefully down through the sage to the Los Algodones road, after which they made fast time to the ranch. Here one

of the hands took the car and departed for Los Algodones to bring back the only two doctors there, while Don Jaime aided Mrs. Ganby to make her patients comfortable.

CHAPTER XXVII

ABOUT noon the next day Jaime Miguel Higuenes came into Roberta's room and sat down on her bed. She reached her hand out to him and he took it in both of his.

"Caraveo and his men have just got back safely," he informed her. "Not a man of that bandit gang got back across the river, so I venture to say this has been a lesson to them. I imagine the Rancho Valle Verde will be regarded in beyond-the-Border circles as a good place to keep away from hereafter. How's the future Mrs. Higuenes feeling now?"

"Not very chipper, Jimmy. How do you feel?"

"Guilty as a sheep-killing dog. Still every cloud has a silver lining. Dingle's dead and I imagine he died intestate. At any rate I have a suspicion nobody is going to come around and claim a ten per cent interest in my lambs. And I have a telegram from your Uncle Bill. It seems that when the news of the battle got to Los Algodones last night, via the man I sent after the doctors, the editor of the local palladium of liberty, the Los Algodones Herald, considered it of sufficient importance to put on the wire to the El Paso office of the United Press. So it was in the El Paso papers this morning, and your Uncle Bill read it there."

"Uncle Bill? Why, what was he doing in El Paso?"

"En route to Valle Verde, my dear. I'd wired the old gentleman a hearty invitation to come down and visit us, and he has accepted and was on his way." Thus Jaime Miguel Higuenes—the liar! However, he comforted himself with the thought that it was only a white lie and was to be preferred to violating his word of honor to Crooked Bill not to reveal to his niece the news that only two days previous he had been in Los Algodones, plotting against their peace and happiness.

"You're such a dear, Jimmy. So thoughtful. Dear Uncle Bill. I know he's missed me. Does he know I'm hurt?"

"Yes, the papers carried the story. I've wired him on the train to save his tears until our wedding day."

"Are we engaged, Jimmy? I can't remember that you've ever asked me to marry you."

"Oh, didn't I, sweetheart?"

"Never."

He rubbed his tanned chin and his lazy eyes roved over her whimsically. "I suppose I was afraid I might speak out of my turn, but of course when you came stampeding into that corral yesterday and broke the glad news to me, I couldn't, as a man of honor, pretend I didn't understand you. So I rather took it for granted."

He bent low over her and swept her cheeks with his eager lips. "Still interested in those bummer lambs, boll-weevil and irrigation, brown babies and cholo men

and women, heat, dust and purple lights on the buttes at dawn and sunset, darling?"

She nodded. "I can be a good partner, Jimmy. I never had any responsibilities—and now I want so badly to share yours—always. How are your wounded men?"

"Taking an interest in life. I sent them over a quart of thirty-year-old Bourbon whisky a friend gave me recently. Mrs. Ganby is still weeping with joy over our engagement, and Robbie is jealous as a collie dog. He has an idea that when we're married he'll have to leave the ranch."

"I wouldn't even have a ground squirrel leave this ranch, Jimmy."

"Then we'll keep Robbie and his ma on the payroll. After all, we owe Robbie a great debt. If he hadn't blabbed to Ken Hobart, that unfortunate Yankee, Glenn Hackett, might have got you on the rebound, although to be quite frank, it was never my intention to permit you to escape. I schemed too darned hard to get you here—and any time Jaime Miguel Higuenes rolls the crust for a pie, nobody else is going to eat it."

"Does Uncle Bill know of our engagement?"

Don Jaime produced the telegram and read:

I NEVER FIGURED ON YOU TAKING OVER MY PRINCIPAL RESPONSIBILITY BUT NOW THAT YOU INSIST ON BEING RECKLESS TAKE A TIP FROM ONE WHO KNOWS STOP DO NOT SPOIL HER STOP I DID THAT

LONG AGO STOP YOU ARE AS WELCOME IN OUR FAMILY AS THE SILENCE THAT FOLLOWS A CONGRESSIONAL ORATION

SHEEPISHLY YOURS

UNCLE BILL

"Why does he sign himself 'sheepishly yours,' Jimmy dear?"

"Some far-fetched allusion to the sheep that brought you here, Bobby. Just some of his gringo humor, I imagine."

"I see." She was silent, turning his brown, strong, useful hands, counting the calluses on them. Hands that had known toil and would always know it, the hands that build empires, hands that, when folded at last in the peace that would mean their parting, would be kissed by lowly people and sprinkled with their tears.

"It will be forever and ever, Jimmy," she whispered, "and I'm so happy—and grateful."

"The Higuenes men keep their women," he assured her gravely.

She thought of Glenn Hackett. "Poor dear," she murmured absently.

"He never had a chance," Don Jaime assured her, with a flash of that prescience, that clairvoyancy, that would always make him, for Roberta, a new, puzzling, yet wholly understandable human being and a joy forever. Yes, he would be the same always, yet always

new, always challenging her interest, always holding it. Of him (the girl thought) it might be said that age could not wither nor custom stale his infinite variety.

"I'll get my guitar and sing you a little Spanish love song my grandmother taught me," he suggested. "It's very old. It came into Peru with Pizarro and worked north. Oh, by the way, I forgot something! Let's get this on record officially. Miss Antrim, will you do me the great honor to marry me?"

"You outrageous Celt," she laughed. "You're the last of the troubadours. Of course I will."

THE END

James Oliver Curwood's

POWERFUL STORIES OF THE GREAT NORTH
EACH AND EVERY ONE A THRILLER

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list.

SON OF THE FORESTS
GREEN TIMBER
THE PLAINS OF ABRAHAM
THE BLACK HUNTER
THE ANCIENT HIGHWAY
A GENTLEMAN OF COURAGE
THE ALASKAN
THE COUNTRY BEYOND
THE FLAMING FOREST
THE RIVER'S END
KAZAN
BAREE, SON OF KAZAN
THE DANGER TRAIL
THE HUNTED WOMAN
THE FLOWER OF THE NORTH

GROSSET & DUNLAP *Publishers* NEW YORK

IT'S A CRIME

if you haven't read these fascinating MYSTERY STORIES

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list.

ERLE STANLEY GARDNER
The Case of the Caretaker's Cat
The Case of the Sleepwalker's Niece
The Case of the Counterfeit Eye
The Case of the Velvet Claws
The Case of the Howling Dog
The Case of the Sulky Girl
The Case of the Lucky Legs
The Case of the Curious Bride
The D.A. Calls It Murder

VALENTINE WILLIAMS
Dead Man Manor
Clue of the Rising Moon

FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS
The Crime at Nornes

DAVID FROME
Mr. Pinkerton Grows a Beard
Mr. Pinkerton Has the Clue

TIMOTHY FULLER
Harvard Has a Homicide

AGATHA CHRISTIE
Murder in Mesopotamia
The A.B.C. Murders
The Boomerang Clue
Murder in the Calais Coach
Thirteen At Dinner
The Murder of Roger Ackroyd
Death In the Air
Mr. Parker Pyne, Detective

DASHIELL HAMMETT
The Glass Key
The Maltese Falcon
The Thin Man

MILTON PROPPER
The Election Booth Murder

ELLERY QUEEN
Adventures of Ellery Queen
The Chinese Orange Mystery
Spanish Cape Mystery
The American Gun Mystery
The Greek Coffin Mystery
The Dutch Shoe Mystery

H. ASHBROOK
A Most Immoral Murder

ANTHONY ABBOTT
About the Murder of a Startled Lady

JAMES HILTON
Was It Murder?

JOHN DICKSON CARR
Death Watch

S. S. VAN DINE
The Scarab Murder Case
The Dragon Murder Case
The Bishop Murder Case

GEORGE H. COXE
The Barotique Mystery

EARL DERR BIGGERS
The Chinese Parrot
The Black Camel
Charlie Chan Carries On
Seven Keys To Baldpate

A. CONAN DOYLE
Tales of Sherlock Holmes
The Hound of the Baskervilles

GROSSET & DUNLAP *Publishers* NEW YORK

Zane Grey's Thrilling Novels

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list.

Zane Grey has lived the rugged life he writes about in his books. The wild fierce blood of Indian chiefs flows in his veins. All his stories are splendidly American, thrilling, romantic, packed with action and color.

Lost Wagon Train
The Trail Driver
Code of the West
Robber's Roost
Drift Fence
Arizona Ames
Sunset Pass
The Shepherd of Guadaloupe
Fighting Caravans
Wild Horse Mesa
Nevada
Forlorn River
Under the Tonto Rim
The Vanishing American
The Thundering Herd
Wanderer of the Wasteland
Thunder Mountain
The Call of the Canyon
The Hash Knife Outfit
To the Last Man
The Mysterious Rider
The Man of the Forest
The U-P Trail
Wildfire
The Border Legion
The Rainbow Trail
The Heritage of the Desert
Riders of the Purple Sage
Light of Western Stars
The Lone Star Ranger
Desert Gold
Betty Zane

GROSSET & DUNLAP *Publishers* NEW YORK

William MacLeod Raine's

DASHING NOVELS of FRONTIER LIFE

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list.

Raine himself once rode the plains with the Arizona Rangers. So the hiss of the branding iron and the music of spitting six-shooters are no strangers to him.

Run of the Brush

Border Breed

The Trail of Danger

For Honor and Life

Under Northern Stars

Beyond the Rio Grande

Colorado

A Man Four Square

Brand Blotters

Wyoming

Crooked Trails and Straight

Square Shooter

Roaring River

The Broad Arrow

The Black Tolts

The Fighting Tenderfoot

Judge Colt

Gunsight Pass

A Texas Ranger

Bucky O'Connor

A Daughter of the Dons

Ridgeway of Montana

GROSSET & DUNLAP *Publishers* NEW YORK

GREAT NOVELS OF ADVENTURE
by RAFAEL SABATINI

May be had wherever books are sold. Ask for Grosset & Dunlap's list.

As with Joseph Conrad, English is his adopted tongue. The son of itinerant opera-singers, he was born in Italy. Educated in Portugal and Switzerland, he now lives in London. He has rescued the historical novel from the literary dust-bin and wears with elegance and grace the inherited mantle of Dumas. His pages are bright with the flash of cutlass and rapier. His chapters are alive with marching men and painted pirate ships.

CHIVALRY

VENETIAN MASQUE

THE STALKING HORSE

CAPTAIN BLOOD RETURNS

THE CAROLINIAN

CAPTAIN BLOOD

THE SEA HAWK

SCARAMOUCHE

GROSSET & DUNLAP *Publishers* NEW YORK